

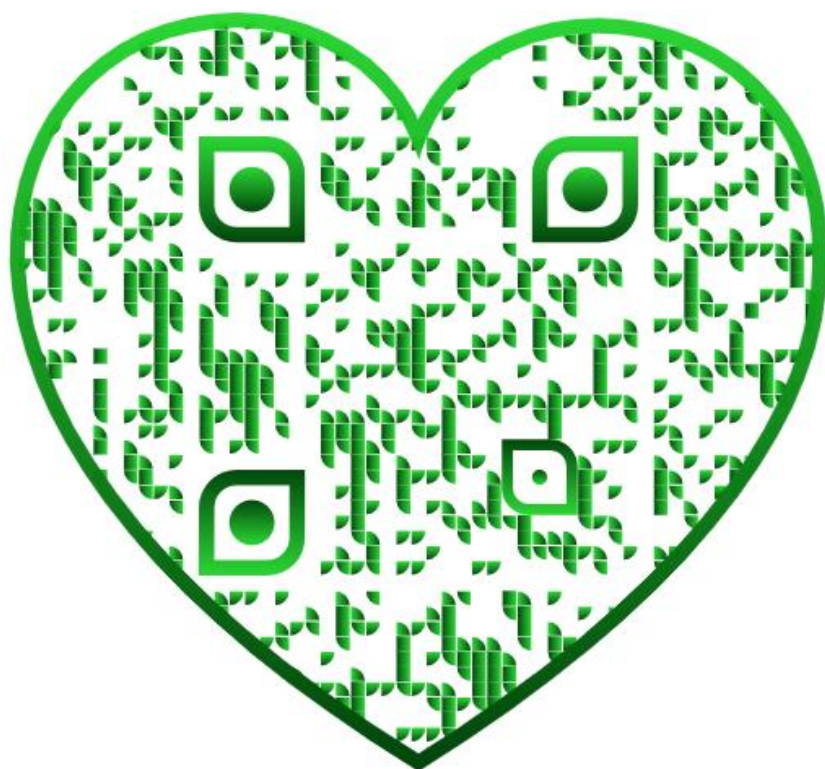


Bibliophile Princess 4

Awaiting and Wishing

Author: Yui

Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena





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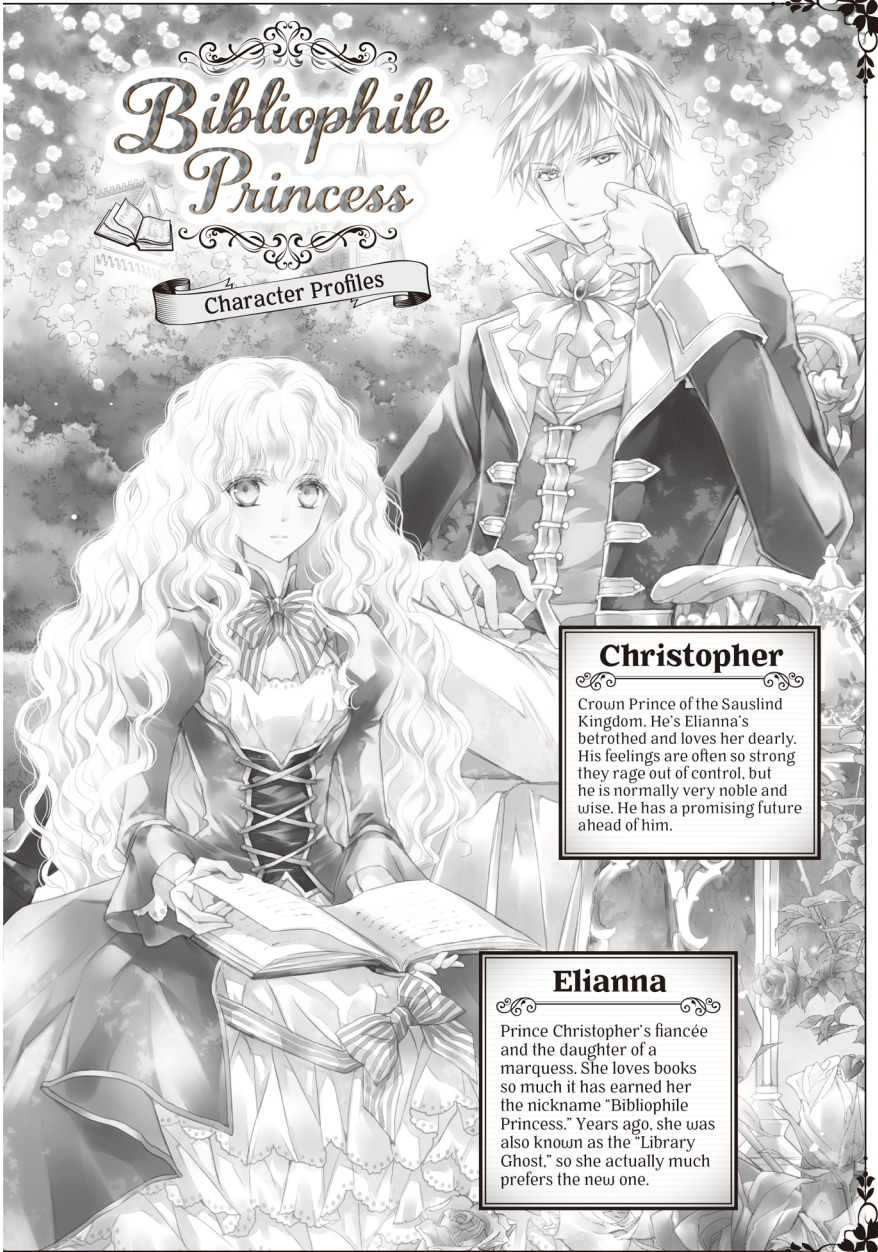
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Bibliophile Princess

Character Profiles

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sauslind Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago, she was also known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers the new one.

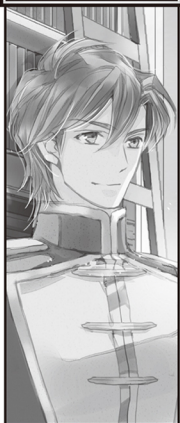


Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet, "Ice Scion."

Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.

Theodore

Younger brother of the reigning king of Sausind and Christopher's uncle. He's a popular and charismatic man in the prime of his life but is still single.



Lilia

Elianna's cousin, who currently serves as her maid in the palace.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as Sausind's Brain. A very important family. When they last appeared out in the open and assisted during a previous king's reign, the country flourished.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sausind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sausind. Known as a maritime nation.

The Ashen Nightmare

A plague that once swept over Sausind. A cure has yet to be found for it.

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Arc 1: Waiting for Spring, An Amber Wish

Chapter 1: The Palace's Three Wise Men

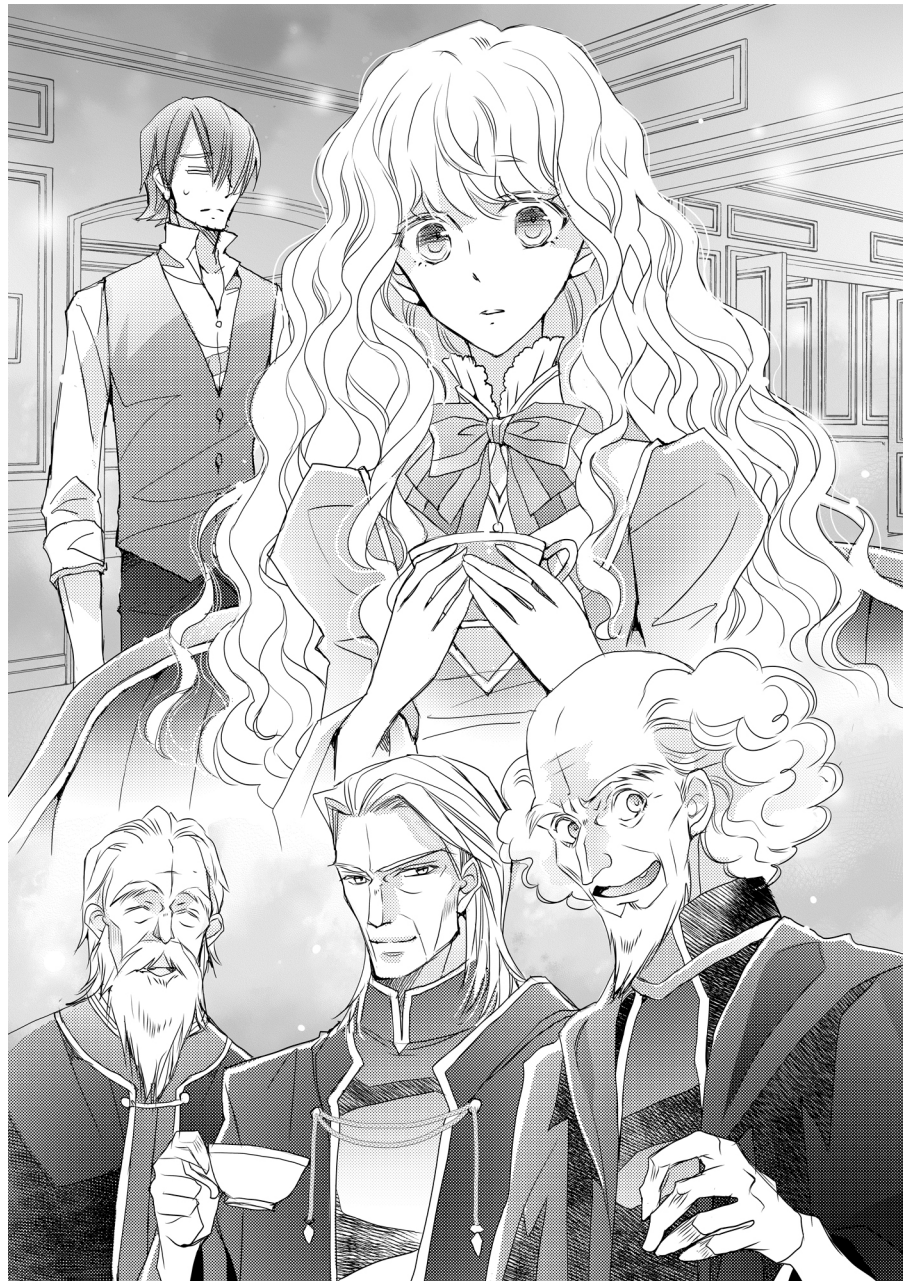
In the wake of the new year, the royal palace was abuzz with activity. It was here that I, Elianna Bernstein, found myself sipping on some uniquely flavored herbal tea as I blinked in surprise at the question I'd just been asked.

We were in a remote part of the palace known as the Pharmacy Lab. A peculiar odor permeated the air, one that would ward off anyone unaccustomed to visiting the area. Some of the researchers were brewing medicine, and the resulting smoke stung my ashen gray eyes, forcing me to shutter them.

My maid always detested how the scents from this room seeped into her hair and clothes, so whenever I visited, she was quick to retreat elsewhere. Being a frequent visitor, I was desensitized to the smell and gently returned my tea cup after taking a drink.

The herbal tea they served here had such a bizarre flavor that many hesitated to take a second sip after trying the first. Worse yet, the researchers would leer at anyone who drank their concoctions as if monitoring the person for possible side effects. It was little wonder rumors circulated that they were using their tea to test new medicines. Though, it didn't seem the researchers were satisfied by whatever results they had observed thus far.

As I drank said experimental mixture, I echoed the question I'd just received moments prior. "You're asking what book I want to read the most in the world?"



I had never really given such a thing much thought. By the time I was old enough to grasp what was happening around me, I was already surrounded by a plethora of books. I could get my hands on most anything I wanted to read by using my house's connections. But he wasn't simply asking what books I wanted to read; he wanted me to pick a single one. That required careful contemplation.

Sitting with me were three elderly men referred to as the "three wise men." One of them hummed in amusement before throwing in his own answer ahead of my own. "If it were me, I'd pick the medical journal, *The Snake's Circle*, written by Askleia. Only gods possess the medical secrets and knowledge said to be contained within its pages. Anyone interested in medicine would be remiss to overlook such invaluable wisdom."

This man was the chief court physician, Doctor Harvey. He looked well past his prime, with slicked back silvery gray hair and wrinkles around his gentle eyes. Even at his old age, he was diligent about shaving his facial hair.

"Hohoho," another voice joined in, his laughter sounding much like an owl's hooting. "Come now, Harvey, the book you truly wish to read is one you've long been searching for. The Luna red light district's *Ten Stories from Famous Courtesans - Limited Edition*, right?"

His teasing tone prompted Doctor Harvey to chuckle in response. "It's difficult for me to answer that. There's another that caught my eye, a book that came out during the red light district's golden age under King Rudolph's reign, called *The Palace of Nectar: Ten Erotic Nights*. It's said to contain some of the seduction techniques used by prostitutes, but it's so rare people question whether it exists or not. If you asked me to choose between those two and *The Snake's Circle*, it would certainly be a tough decision."

Should it really be that difficult to decide? I wondered.

Doctor Harvey spoke solemnly, seeming entirely serious despite the amused twinkle in his eyes as he turned to the elderly man addressing him. "Orphen, you seem quite perceptive when it comes to guessing what other people would select, but what about you? Would you choose *Record of a Thousand Steps*? Or *Praya's Scroll*, which verifies the existence of the lost continent of Atlus?"

"Hohoho," Orphen chortled again in genuine amusement. This man had a long white beard, framing his warm and cheerful face. "You know me all too well. Both of those tomes are mere legend, and yet those in pursuit of knowledge speak with conviction that they truly do exist somewhere out there. It'd be a dilemma indeed to pick between the two."

Orphen's eyes shone like a child receiving a new present as he

leaned forward. “Besides,” he said, launching into a passionate speech, “it’s said the content of *Praya’s Scroll* was copied by a priest who stumbled upon a tablet in some old temple ruins, but even that story lacks credibility. Personally, I’m a fan of the theory that it was a message written in the stars. But first, I want to hear Lady Elianna’s opinion on the scroll. There’s no better time than now to discuss it.”

People might find it hard to believe that this man was one of the people in charge of the crown prince’s education.

I sat there watching with a blank look on my face as Doctor Harvey gave his usual sigh. “If you don’t rein in those delusions about ancient civilizations, people are going to think you’re just a senile old codger soon enough.”

“Hohoho, not very convincing coming from a pervert like you. I believe that’s the ‘pot calling the kettle black.’”

“What are you talking about, Orphen?” Doctor Harvey shook his head. “Do you even know what kind of image your Ancient Cultural Research Society has? People think they’re a new religious cult. The meteorologists have been grumbling about them, saying, ‘It’s absurd! People shouldn’t be stargazing in hopes of receiving mystical messages from the stars!’”

“What a sad world we live in when people don’t believe in the sacred mysteries contained in distant stars,” Orphen lamented. “However, Harvey, I heard the maids in the palace have been avoiding your apprentices. Apparently they ‘wanted to know how patients feel when being examined,’ so they were asking the maids for their clothes. I hear all the women ran from them.”

“That was for one of our performances at the new year’s banquet. Honestly, I’m ashamed of how inexperienced they are, not being able to strip such clothes off by themselves. Seems they’ll require more training.”

Their conversation had taken off in a completely different direction. I continued to sit there, blinking in confusion. Most of my time was spent in the royal archives, so perhaps that was why I was so unfamiliar with the goings-on in the other parts of the palace. Well, to be frank, I was already well aware of these men’s interests and proclivities before this conversation even began.

As the two of them continued to fuss at each other, the third man sitting amongst them ignored his peers in favor of turning his attention to me. “Heh, heh, heh... Well, my lady, have you come to a decision as to which book it is you want to read most in the world?”

He was the last member of their group of three, Chief Herbalist Nigel, and the one who had originally asked that question to begin with. His hair was disheveled and unkempt, as if an experiment had exploded in his face and left it thus. He looked like a child in the way

that his eyes shone with unadulterated curiosity. At a glance, his odd appearance might be intimidating to some, but he was the foremost member of the Royal Pharmacy. He'd also been my herbology teacher for the past four years.

I briefly contemplated his question but soon returned my perplexed gaze to him after finding it too difficult to answer. "I'm afraid I can't think of one right off the top of my head."

The mischievous old man arched a teasing brow at me, as if to say, "You? The Bibliophile Princess?"

True, I was a lover of books—a devourer, a bibliophage—hence the epithet, but there were so many tomes in the world whose pages I'd yet to flip through. There were books about mythology, books questioning the veracity of certain legends and illusions, books about prophecy that tried to spell out the future for us, books lost in war that our ancestors had intended to leave for us. I was sure many more such volumes were still to be written.

The more I mulled over his query, the more the possibilities seemed endless. There were still so many books I had yet to have the pleasure of perusing. I had only been alive a mere eighteen years, after all. If he restricted me to picking only one, I knew the second I had it in my hands, I would be thirsting after the next. Personally, as an avid reader, I found the question to be almost impossible to answer.

While I puzzled over how best to reply, Doctor Harvey glanced over at me with a smirk on his face. "Lady Elianna, isn't the book you want to read most *Knowledge for a Bride?*"

I felt my cheeks heat up at the mention.

"Oh come now," Orphen interrupted jovially, "wouldn't she be better reading *A New Wife's Guide to Controlling Her Husband?* Although she seems to have him pretty much under her thumb already."

"Indeed," Doctor Harvey said, nodding. "Though I suspect if we hand her books on intercourse before their wedding, His Highness will be cross with us. Ah, what about *Ten Ways to Know if Your Husband's Cheating?* Mothers often give that as a gift when their daughters are about to get married. I would be happy to secure a copy."

I recoiled, overwhelmed by their energetic proposals.

Now that the new year had begun, the kingdom was at last making preparations for my wedding with the crown prince in the spring. High society had been dormant over the winter, but as soon as the new year began, they were all eagerly clamoring together with anticipation. In the wake of the Holy Night's Banquet, many nobles had announced their engagements. The entire kingdom was restless with excitement. I'd even heard that merchants who'd gathered in the

capital were selling marriage talismans.

I could tell, based on all of this, how much the people were looking forward to our wedding. As the prince's betrothed, I spent my days busily making preparations as well. However, at the moment, I had more urgent duties requiring my consideration and other anxieties that kept my mind too preoccupied to think of our impending ceremony. Having these elders call my attention back to our wedding made me feel embarrassed.

"Honestly, you two," Chief Herbalist Nigel remarked in exasperation. "Thanks to you, our conversation has gone completely off topic."

Doctor Harvey grunted back at him. "The only reason you're asking her what book she wants to read is because you're hoping to get a leg up on what gift to offer her at the wedding. I hear you already have a present prepared in that lab of yours. A medicine that can lower a man's libido, is it? Terrifying, indeed."

My manservant was seated nearby, sipping on some of the herbal tea one of the researchers had provided. Upon hearing those ominous words, however, he immediately spewed his drink. Afterward, he began choking and gagging. "Water please," he croaked out, stumbling.

Orphen merely chuckled, unbothered by the revelation. Instead, he seemed invested in the turn of our conversation. "A medicine with the opposite effect has been passed down from ancient times, one using ingredients such as sea lion or deer antlers. But you're concocting a mixture which *decreases* libido? You're encroaching on forbidden territory, Nigel." His eyes gleamed with curiosity about the unknown, contradicting his cautionary words.

I thought Nigel might sigh in response, but instead he chuckled. "Forbidden territory indeed, Orphen." When he noticed the confused look I was giving him, he turned to me and used the same form of address that he'd used these past four years. "Milady, speaking of taboos, do you know of the forbidden tome on herbology?"

My heart hammered with surprise, bringing me crashing back to reality. I suppressed my reaction and answered him as coolly as I could. "Might you be referring to *Furya's Jar*?"

Furya was the daughter of the god of medicine, Askleia. Depictions of Furya always showed her with a jar balanced on her shoulder. It was said that this jar harbored secrets on cure-all medicines that could remedy all the diseases and sicknesses in the world. There was also talk it contained the much sought after elixir of immortality, which many an authority figure had dreamed of acquiring. For that reason, she was hailed as a goddess of herbology and medicine, while at the same time she was viewed as a deity of the

forbidden. *Furya's Jar* was yet another tome that touched upon secrets of medicine, much like the other book of legend, *The Snake's Circle*.

I first heard about the book over ten years ago, when the Ashen Nightmare began sweeping over Sauslind. No one knew of a cure for the plague, but at the time, I was certain one had to exist somewhere. I suspected *Furya's Jar* would have the answers I sought.

The Bernsteins were known as book aficionados, and our house was swimming with a vast number of books. When I was still too young to know any better, I found it bizarre that we didn't possess a copy of *Furya's Jar*, so I demanded my father tell me why he hadn't procured one. There had been pain in his eyes as he stroked the top of my head and gently reprimanded me for my ignorance.

I could still recall that conversation in vivid detail. Likewise, now that I was older and wiser, I understood the meaning of his words better. Yet I had to ask myself: would I still seek answers from *Furya's Jar* to cure the world's problems, just as I had when I was younger?

The chief herbalist seemed to read my expression as if I were an open book. "If *Furya's Jar* really did exist, what would you do?"

I swallowed hard, unnerved by the earnestness in his eyes as he surveyed my reaction. If someone had asked me the same question when I was a child, I would have surely jumped at the opportunity. The world was overflowing with people who were suffering. Not a day went by when someone didn't grieve or lament some loss. One of the people I loved most had died from the plague back then. What was there to hesitate over? If it meant saving someone I love, I should have no reason to second guess.

And yet...

My hands tightened into fists in my lap, clutching tightly at the fabric of my dress.

Orphen chimed in with his light-hearted, owl-like laughter, "You're being too hard on her, Nigel."

"Indeed," Doctor Harvey agreed with a firm nod. "Anyone—even I—would jump at the opportunity to read *Furya's Jar* if it truly did exist. Have you found some evidence to suggest it does?"

Nigel's lips quirked into a smile as the other two elders eyed him inquisitively, and he turned his gaze away from me.

I felt more comfortable now, like this was just another one of the many lectures he'd given over the past four years. I steadied my breathing and articulated my answer. "I would like to read it. Even if you told me it was the last book I would ever read in my life as you set it down in front of me, I think I would still tell you the same thing."

The way I answered without a hint of hesitation took both Doctor Harvey and Orphen by surprise, as evidenced by the way their eyes

widened.

Without wavering, I continued, “However, there is also another ancient medical text called *Ryza’s Guide*. My father handed me a copy of it when I was younger and asked him why we didn’t have *Furya’s Jar* in our library. It’s a medical journal written by a doctor from the empire. Newer medical journals are in print and being distributed now, so lack of demand for *Ryza’s Guide* means everyone has all but forgotten its existence.”

When my father first gave it to me, I knew nothing about the world or the basics of medicine. He handed me what he had on hand instead—a book he thought I’d be able to understand. I innocently combed its pages for the answers I sought. I was certain he’d given it to me because it contained a hint as to how we might cure my mother’s illness.

Alas, that was not the case.

“I couldn’t comprehend why he’d given me such a thing. I wanted to read a book filled with miracle cures, not some outdated medical journal. Why in the world had he foisted a book with antiquated knowledge on me? And yet, as I compared what was written there to the most current medical texts of our time, I realized something.”

It was a rather simple and obvious realization.

“The doctor who penned *Ryza’s Guide* was monotheistic, but he still recorded as much medical knowledge and folk remedies from other cultures and countries as he could without violating his own beliefs. I believe he did this hoping it would spur further medical discoveries and improvements in the future. There were surely illnesses and diseases during his time that they didn’t have a cure for, and yet he created that book in hopes that one day we would find one. Reading his book, I could feel all the emotion he poured into it—the sincere wish that his efforts might help future generations.”

Normally when we spoke about medical journals, Doctor Harvey had a perverted aura about him, but it was subdued right now as he quietly watched and listened.

Although I knew the chief herbalist would disagree with my answer, I continued without pause. “The same can be said of herbology and other fields. People long for knowledge and texts that have all the answers. That desire exists within all of us. So yes, if that book did exist, I would want to read it. However, I don’t think it would invalidate all the medical knowledge we have accumulated over the years. The people who wrote those books dedicated themselves to studying and chose that path in the pursuit of something greater than they were.”

I took a small breath before expressing the last of the feelings lurking inside me. “Personally, I would like for *Furya’s Jar* to be

nothing more than a legend. My father told me before to think about why that text is considered a taboo. A book with all of the answers is a weapon. If someone in power were to acquire such a thing, it could be used to change the course of the entire world. If you were to ask me to pick between an all-knowing book and one packed with the efforts, failures, and sincere wishes of the humans that wrote it, I would pick the latter. Does this answer suffice?"

A suffocating tension hung in the air between me and the chief herbalist. Soon, it spread until it pervaded the entire lab. The sound of quietly boiling herbs seemed deafeningly loud amidst the eerie silence.

The chief herbalist let out a low chuckle. It was more subdued than his usual laugh and heavy with emotion. "I'd give that answer a passing mark."

I let out a breath, relieved. Passing was the best mark you could hope to earn from Nigel. It was unconventional (read: unheard of) for him to give any apprentice anything above a passing grade.

"Hohoho," Orphen chortled. He saw right through Nigel's reaction and explained, "Whenever you laugh like that, it means your pupil has given a gold star answer. Interesting, Nigel. You once had an apprentice who became so enraptured by *Furya's Jar* that they committed the taboo. You must've been worried that Lady Elianna might repeat the same mistake."

That answer seemed to satisfy Doctor Harvey as well. He let out a sigh and nodded. "Considering she's to be our next queen, it would throw the country into chaos if she were to truly desire *Furya's Jar*. Still, it's a shame... Although, it's not too late, Lady Elianna. You would make for a brilliant female physician if you decided to walk that path instead of becoming queen." His smile was playful and inviting, but there was sincerity in his eyes and voice.

Having someone propose an entirely different life path for me was so surprising I could only gape at him.

Orphen and Nigel sounded amused by their friend's proposal but cautioned him against it all the same.

"Give it up, Harvey," said Orphen. "You'll start rumors that the crown prince has a fondness for women doctors."

"Well said," Nigel agreed. "You don't want to make yourself an enemy of a boy that possessive, or your medical office will find itself on the receiving end of the same psychological harassment my lab has been facing."

Psychological harassment?

Before I could ask what Nigel meant by that, Doctor Harvey cut me off with a knowing voice as he sighed in resignation. "The way that boy corners his opponents borders on vindictive. I will regret not

being able to induct Lady Elianna into our ranks, but I digress, Nigel. Your way of teaching is so indirect and ambiguous. You could have told her the truth—that you once had an apprentice who became so obsessed with *Furya's Jar* that they destroyed themselves in the process. Instead, you gave us false hope that such legends might be true.” He seemed so indignant, as though he was disappointed that he wouldn't be able to read the taboo tome after all.

The chief herbalist rolled his eyes and replied, “I don't recall ever aiming the question at you two.”

“You have always been secretive about the way you do things,” Doctor Harvey said, shaking his head. “As a way of apologizing for getting our hopes up, tell us about this mysterious powder you're researching at the moment. I heard you had ships on the eastern trade route fetch it for you.”

Nigel snickered. He was back to his usual mischievous laughter. “Thanks to Lady Elianna, interest in eastern herbal medicine has swelled these past four years. That powder was ground down from a certain plant. It was exceedingly difficult to get our hands on seedlings. These are said to work on a disease of the feet which they call ‘foot worms.’ I've dissolved the mixture into water to see how it works for now.”

Nearby, Jean had finally located a water pitcher, but the moment he heard that, he spewed the liquid from his mouth. The way he shot out his drink reminded me of the Merlion statue I saw described in foreign literature. He certainly had seemed on edge this entire time. Perhaps, as a mistress to a manservant who lacked such basic etiquette, I owed the three wise men an apology on his behalf.

In front of me, Doctor Harvey had shifted forward in his seat as he asked, “What sickness are you referring to?”

Orphen remarked, “Ah, so that's why you were requesting a translation from one of the eastern countries' languages. We finally came up with a system for doing that.”

“It was written that these ‘foot worms’ caused such problems for one country's king that he couldn't even get a peaceful night's sleep. I'm hoping to get a translation as quickly as possible,” said Nigel. It sounded as if he already knew they were in the process of completing the translation but was eager to coax them along nonetheless.

It warmed my heart to see these three wise men discussing the topic in earnest together. I smiled, oblivious to the unvoiced complaints my gagging manservant had sitting at the tip of his tongue.

Chapter 2: Battle God of the East

“No one deserves to go through what I just went through...” Jean’s face was pale as he massaged his stomach and grumbled. He was following a short distance behind Orphen, Doctor Harvey, and myself as we left the Pharmacy Lab, accompanied by the imperial guard.

Only a few moments prior, a familiar face had popped in—Lord Glen’s second-in-command. Before I had the opportunity to recall his name, he’d offered it up of his own accord. “My name’s Zack. I’m sorry, but we can save that part for later, Lady Elianna. I realize how discourteous it is for me to ask this of you, but could I trouble you to come with me?”

I stared blankly back at him, surprised at the urgency of his request.

The three wise men immediately inquired as to the nature of his sudden visit, and we soon learned the reason for his haste. Apparently one of the visitors I was supposed to receive and entertain had arrived in the capital earlier than anticipated. Due to that individual’s unique disposition, the imperial guard was being dragged out to welcome them.

Now I understood why they’d come to retrieve me, but I still didn’t know what all the hurry was for.

Vice Captain Zack sensed my confusion. He wore an earnest expression as he entreated me, “If you’re there to spectate, our unit might get out of this relatively unscathed. So please, humor me.”

“All right...” Reluctantly, I lifted myself out of my chair.

The three wise men followed suit. Nigel tried to tag along, claiming he was old friends with the visitor we were going to meet, but the other researchers intervened to keep him in the lab. We left him behind as we headed for an even more remote part of the palace.

The farther we traveled from the central area of the palace, the more the chilly winter air seeped in through our clothes. This morning there had only been a light flurry of snow falling from the sky, but as afternoon rolled around, the weather took a sudden turn. A blizzard was now raging. As a result, the social meeting area the palace had opened for the nobles was deserted today. Instead of the elegantly dressed noblewomen I’d grown accustomed to seeing, there was only the occasional government official moving to and fro. It felt a bit lonely seeing only the drab garb of gentlemen’s work uniforms. I

missed the colorful and vibrant sight of ladies' dresses.

Behind us, my manservant continued rattling off his grievances as we traversed the corridors. Doctor Harvey, who'd become acquainted with Jean through the past four years we'd spent together, chuckled as he said, "You should know better than to drink whatever the Pharmacy Lab puts in front of you."

"...I figured it was fine as long as m'lady wasn't involved."

"You're more naive than I'd given you credit for then." After a short pause, Doctor Harvey added, "By the way, if you happen to notice any bodily abnormalities, be sure to let me know. I would love to compare the effects of that medicine versus natural human aging."

"Why are you treatin' me like some kind of human experiment? What kind of doctor has no moral compass?" As Jean resumed his fussing, I rummaged through the folds of my dress, trying to locate the candy my brother had slipped me earlier. Jean eyed me suspiciously when I held it out toward him, but he cautiously took it. After testing the flavor on his tongue, he popped the whole thing in his mouth and finally went quiet.

Ever since we were little, my brother often gave me hard candy during reading breaks. I wasn't a fan of sweets, so I'd rather give it to my whining manservant and spare my ears from his incessant grouching.

Now that it had grown quiet again, I turned to Orphen and decided to revisit the question I'd lost the timing to ask earlier. "You mentioned something about Chief Herbalist Nigel having an apprentice who delved into the taboo?"

This amiable old man always had a curious twinkle in his eyes, but that disappeared the moment he heard my inquiry, as if snuffed out by shadows. "Indeed," he murmured, stroking his snow white beard as he hesitated to elaborate. "I suppose you must not be aware of the incident that happened when the current king first ascended the throne. Well...I'm sure you'll understand soon enough."

My heart dropped. Perhaps this wasn't the kind of conversation we should be having in a hallway.

Orphen gave a quiet smile as he relayed what he could.

Almost twenty years ago, there was an extremely talented and ambitious youth who joined the palace's Pharmacy Lab. They were so resourceful and quick-witted that the chief herbalist became unusually partial to this particular apprentice. Unfortunately...

"They were clever but precocious, full of ambition and curiosity. Eventually, the current research in herbology wasn't enough to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. They became obsessed with the wonders *Furya's Jar* promised—a cure-all medicine, a panacea. What do you think is necessary to prove that kind of thing really exists?"

I swallowed hard. Imagining it was terrifying enough that I felt my body tremble. “A...poison? Such as a deadly toxin with no cure.”

Orphen’s normally cheerful expression grew strained as his lips went taut. “The Pharmacy Lab is well versed in a variety of poisons. They have to be, in order to protect the royal family. However, that young apprentice crossed a line which must never be crossed. They tried to test their theory using a real human being.”

It can’t be... The words hung at the back of my throat, unspoken. I’d heard of a poisoning incident in the past. My heart panged thinking it was the chief herbalist’s apprentice who’d orchestrated that event.

“What happened to them?” I asked hesitantly.

“They were executed. Given their crime, it was the only recourse.”

Although I had anticipated that response, hearing the worst had come to pass left me breathless and dizzy. I could only imagine what Nigel and the others had felt at the time.

Doctor Harvey, who’d been listening quietly to our exchange, chimed in with a voice of nostalgia. “I only heard about what happened after the fact, but if that apprentice hadn’t lost their way, perhaps we might have found a treatment for the Ashen Nightmare that sprang up after that incident. At least, that’s what some say. Goes to show how much promise that apprentice had. There were even rumors that their abilities were so impressive they’d surpassed Nigel.”

Orphen cleared his throat. “People can speak as many ‘what ifs’ they like, but it won’t change a thing. Besides, it’s just as Lady Elianna said. Becoming obsessed with the taboo only distracts from the path that those before us have paved in herbology.”

“Yes,” Doctor Harvey agreed with a bitter smile, “but still...” It was obvious he mourned the loss of such incredible talent.

“Lady Elianna?” Orphen peered back at me. Before I realized, I was standing frozen in the middle of the drafty hallway. The older man’s earnest gaze felt like a weight pressing down on my chest. “There’s nothing harder for old men like us than seeing one of our apprentices lose their way and head to the afterlife before us. As you’ve displayed, you have an eye for noticing the most important details. I’ll be praying you don’t lose sight of yourself or bring any more pain to Nigel than he’s already faced.” There was something profoundly mature about his words, but I could also tell they were spoken out of concern for his friend.

I hesitated over whether I had the determination to rise to their expectations of me or not, especially when I was still so inexperienced. But either way, I couldn’t run from his sincerity. “Yes,” I said at last, carving the warning he’d given me into my heart.

Orphen’s gaze softened, and beside him, Doctor Harvey offered a

warm smile. “You might have had a more promising future if you’d become my apprentice instead of Nigel’s. Ah, what a shame. What a crying shame.”

“If she’d been your apprentice, you would have turned the entire palace into a raunchy pleasure house by now,” Orphen said with his characteristic chuckle.

“That wouldn’t have been so bad either.” Doctor Harvey shrugged, perfectly content to envision such a dream.

A grim voice interjected, “I’m sorry to interrupt your fantasies of a ‘raunchy pleasure palace,’ but if we don’t make haste, we’ll be living in a corpse-filled palace of darkness shortly.” Zack looked panicked, his face pale.

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As we approached the indoor training area, located on the outermost edge of the palace grounds, the voices and hubbub inside grew louder and louder. This was where the imperial guard trained when it rained or snowed.

When I stepped inside, the passion and cheering of the crowd crashed over me. It was so overwhelming that my mind went blank for a few seconds. This was actually my first time stepping foot in here. I had visited the outside training area before when socializing with other people, but usually when we entertained visitors the weather was more agreeable than it was today.

This area was significantly more cramped than the dance hall, yet the people crammed in here were no less enthusiastic. Their body heat made the place feel stuffy and suffocating.

Not surprising, I suppose.

The audience was primarily men who’d spent their lives wielding a blade in battle. Their passion, as they watched the other combatants with vested interest, filled the room.

Vice Commander Zack ushered us forward, prompting us to snake our way around the clusters of people. Through the deafening cacophony of other noises, I could hear the sound of ladies crying and cheering in support. Apparently the palace maids had crowded inside as well. Now it made sense why the rest of the palace had seemed so deserted.

Caught up in the intensity of the atmosphere, I lifted my gaze to find a maid who I recognized a short distance ahead of me. Her face lit up the moment she spotted me. “Miss Eli!” The moment she let my name slip, Lilia slapped her hands over her mouth. My cousin was still unaccustomed to life at the palace, having only started working here a short while ago.

Lilia met the amused gazes of the two wise men who had

accompanied me and immediately straightened herself and curtsayed. As soon as she finished formally greeting me, she grabbed me and started dragging me through the wall of bodies in front of us. "I can't believe you! Where have you been? Everyone was looking for you. We checked the archives, the prince's office... I'm sure the prince will be able to wield his full strength if he knows you're watching!" As much as she tried, she couldn't maintain the formal speech expected of someone in her position, nor could she mask her excitement.

Since I had no idea what was going on, I simply let her drag me to the front of the crowd. The moment we emerged, a noisy round of cheers rang out. The first person I spotted was our blond-haired prince. Even in the dim room, his golden hair still reflected the light brilliantly. His face was as handsome as ever, too. His normally inviting smile was now determined and ambitious.

As he stood in front of the silhouette of his felled opponent, it was obvious from his thinly covered chest that his breathing was a bit labored. He held a practice sword in one hand, and despite his clothes looking a bit disheveled, he still maintained a graceful and refined air about him. This man was unparalleled, with such a commanding presence that demanded everyone's attention.

"The round's over!" the referee announced. "The winner is Prince Christopher!"

The crowd cried out in celebration once more.

Driven by their support, the prince lifted his head. His vivid, clear blue eyes glimmered in the light. He was the kingdom's pride and joy, their promising crown prince. His smile shone with dignity. He looked so gallant and indomitable that I felt my heart tremble the moment I looked at him.

My focus on him was disrupted when Lilia grabbed my arm and exuberantly declared, "That's his third opponent! He's won every single round! Prince Christopher is incredible. I can't believe he was able to defeat three of the Black Wing Knights in a row!" She was astounded by the prince's skill.

The other people in the audience must have been equally surprised. Even though we lived in peaceful times and this was little more than a mock battle, the fact that Lilia and the rest of the crowd were so wildly enthusiastic spoke volumes.

Prince Christopher Selkirk Ashelard was the heir to Sauslind Kingdom's throne. He was also said to be a direct descendant of the Hero King, the man who had brought the kingdom back from the brink of disaster many years ago.

Normally, His Highness didn't participate in the twice yearly martial arts tournament; he merely spectated. As a result, very few knew how talented he was at sword fighting. Of course, he had a

reputation for being as skilled as the imperial guard, but the reason no one knew the extent of his prowess was because he had never fought in the open like this before.

As the prince flipped the practice sword around in his hand, a fearless grin on his face, his next opponent stepped out into the ring.

Lilia squealed with excitement. "This is the fourth one!" she said.

A knight of equal skill to that of the prince was posed to face His Highness next. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, with gentle facial features. He had bright, sun-kissed brown hair and wore the black garb his order was known for. The man looked so slender and lithe that he resembled a rich young lord more than a fighter.

However, the moment this young man appeared, the prince's graceful expression became strained. I couldn't hear over the clamor of the crowd, but his lips moved in what seemed like a derisive remark, though his opponent's response was a cheerful one. The two of them were most likely acquaintances.

As I tried to wrack my brain for who this mystery man might be, a hand shot out from nearby and began shaking me again. "Oh my God, what am I going to do?! I think he might be my type. Oh no, who should I cheer for then?!"

Cheer for whomever you wish?

More importantly, I wished Lilia would cease with her incessant shaking. I was beginning to feel seasick and I wasn't even at sea.

While my vision continued to waver, courtesy of my cousin's enthusiasm, the referee's voice rang out and the match began.

Blunt swords clanged as they crashed against each other, loud enough to drown out even the noisy chatter of the crowd. My heart fluttered nervously with each blow. This was different from ordinary training, hence my anxiety. Although this was a mock battle, it felt real, as if there was still an intense pressure in the air that said losing was out of the question.

I clasped my hands together nervously as I watched. Nearby, the two elderly wise men and Vice Commander Zack were calmly assessing the battle.

"Hm. His Highness's usual habits are evident in the way he fights," said Doctor Harvey.

"Indeed," Orphen agreed. "Reading your opponents moves doesn't mean you can always counter them in advance. I believe I taught him as much when we played strategy games together before."

"I must respectfully disagree." Zack shook his head. "It's one thing when he's facing someone like Commander Glen, who fights on instinct, but His Highness can defeat almost anyone by reading their moves. This man is an exception to the rule, being able to respond to the prince's attacks like that." The vice commander seemed genuinely

impressed as he watched.



His Highness attempted to deflect his opponent's attack, only for the knight to cut in front of him. Anger flashed through the prince's blue eyes.

My hands squeezed so tightly together my knuckles turned white. I was only a novice when it came to swordplay and fighting, but even I knew this knight was not to be underestimated. I could tell the prince's moves were being pinned down, even as he tried to maintain his composure and shrug off his opponent's blows.

Worse yet, since he had won several rounds before, the prince was already winded. Fatigue was gradually starting to dull his movements. And although the blades were blunted, there was no guarantee he would get out of this unscathed.

I wish they would just stop this nonsense.

Right as I started clenching my hands so hard they began to shake, the prince dove forward with a blow, only to have it countered. For just a moment, the prince's chest was left wide open, defenseless. My lungs seemed to freeze. I had no idea what had happened in the span of the few seconds that followed. The knight stepped forward to aim where the prince was most vulnerable, and then he briefly disappeared. A few blinks later and the prince's sword was soaring through the air while the knight leveled his own blade at His Highness's throat. Even their positions had changed—all I could see of the prince was his back.

"The round's over. Drop your weapons!" said the referee.

The crowd cried out, but this time it was in disappointment at the prince's loss.

I stared blankly. I still wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but fortunately, the two elderly men beside me were kind enough to offer their explanations.

"Hohoho," Orphen chuckled. "That knight saw through the prince's tactics."

"Indeed. The prince was trying to feign an opening, hoping his opponent would take the bait, but instead the knight used the opportunity to hit him in his blind spot. The knight knew it was a trap. Although the prince intended to ensnare his opponent, he instead left himself with no way to counter the knight's attack."

The tension finally left my body as I processed what had occurred. I knew it wasn't a real battle, but that hadn't made it any easier on my heart. My hands ached from clenching so hard.

Beside me, Lilia had finally simmered down. "Here," she said, passing me a large handkerchief. She could sense how I'd been on pins and needles watching the fight, so she was acting like a proper maid now.

It would take courage to step forward with so many eyes focused on the center of the ring, but right now I desperately wanted to confirm the prince was unharmed. I offered Lilia a small, gracious smile before accepting the handkerchief and moving into the limelight. As I approached the prince from behind, he was locked in conversation with the knight who had bested him. Said knight was the first to notice me, and I spoke up before my betrothed could look back and spot me. "Your Highness..."

Those vibrant blue eyes turned to meet mine, wide with surprise. "Eli! You were watching?" He seemed genuinely shocked to find me here.

As he gazed at me, my heart began pounding even louder, but I ignored it; there were more pressing matters that required my attention. "Your Highness, are you injured?" I stepped closer to him, my brows set firm as if I were a doctor examining her patient. My eyes swept over his handsome features, noting how crooked his collar was as I peeked down his neck, past his firm shoulders and arms down to his abdominal muscles. I scrutinized him as though I could somehow will myself to see beneath his clothing and spot any bruises he might have sustained that would escape my notice otherwise.

While I looked him over, the prince delivered some puzzling words. "Eli? I appreciate how assertive you're being with that feverish look in your eyes, but it would be better if you could save that for when it's just the two of us."

Pardon?

I furrowed my brows and peered up at him, blinking slowly. He grinned back at me, and after a few moments, I processed the meaning of his insinuation. The moment I realized how shameful my behavior had been, my face lit up, the blush extending down my neck.

I automatically tried to put some distance between us, but the prince smoothly closed the gap, wrapping an arm around my back. It was obvious he had no intention of allowing me to escape. That brilliant smile of his was keeping me hostage just as much as his arm was.

"If I'd known you were watching, I would've done whatever it took to win," he said. "I regret fighting fair."

"Your Highness..." I was feeling shy now that I'd remembered we had so many eyes on us.

The prince's smile widened as he lowered his head toward mine. His voice sounded indulgent as he said, "I haven't fought that hard in a while. Now I'm covered in sweat. Feels a bit uncomfortable."

Was he perhaps insinuating he wanted me to wipe away the sweat for him? Was that it?

What in the world is wrong with today? In such a short period, I have

been asked to do two of the most difficult things I can imagine.

Silently, I hesitated, reluctant to disturb the beautiful golden locks dangling in front of me. But after a few moments, I summoned my courage and lifted my hand, dabbing the handkerchief against the prince's cheek. I was as gentle with him as if I were dealing with a newborn chick. My touch must have tickled because his lips broke out into a smile.

"You need to wipe me off properly, Eli."

Your Highness, how badly must I have wronged you for you to punish me so?

I continued nervously, tears pricking at my eyes from the anxiety and embarrassment. Fortunately, my savior came in the form of a voice calling out from behind us. "Chris, your personality sure has gotten twisted if you get enjoyment out of tormenting the girl you like."

The prince's brow twitched.

Before he could react, the cheerful voice continued, hinting at things I'd never heard about the prince before. "In fact, I've never seen you with such a sugary sweet expression on your face before. Are you the same fifteen-year-old I remember who used his looks and persuasive skills to take on Luwak's proprietress? You're not someone else, are you?"

Midway through the knight speaking, the prince clamped his hands over my ears. He moved as swiftly as Lilia had moments ago, but his hands were gentle so it wasn't painful. However, by doing so, he did block out all of the clamor and chatter in the room as well.

I blinked and peered up at him. The prince straightened his back, eyes narrow and hostile as he glanced behind me. After exchanging a few words with the knight, he finally released my ears. The prince then turned me around so that I was finally facing the man. He had bright, sunny brown hair and gentle features. He was a bit shorter than the prince, but his amber eyes were amiable and inviting.

The prince made no attempt to hide his disdain for the man as he flippantly motioned to him and said, "His name is Ian Brennan. As you can see, he's a member of the Black Wing Knights, but you don't need to remember him. He won't have anything to do with you."

It struck me as odd for the prince to speak without restraint in front of so many people. I glanced back at him briefly, but the knight's chipper voice quickly drew my attention back.

"Thank you for the warm introduction, old friend." The man offered me a gentle smile and put a hand over his heart, greeting me in the manner most noble lords did. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am part of Sauslind's army, the Black Wing Knights, led by the Battle God of the East, the Black Eagle himself. The name's

Ian Brennan.” His eyes were alight with curiosity as he peered over at me, but not so probing as to be unsettling.

That amused smile of his widened as he studied me. “I always wondered what extraordinary person had managed to captivate the interest of our two-faced prince. Lady Elianna Bernstein, you are far more innocent and adorable than the stories give you credit for. You deserve better than Chris.”

The prince’s expression hardened as he stood beside me, but I ignored him in favor of curtsying gracefully, as was expected of a lady of my status. It piqued my interest seeing His Highness act this way around someone other than his inner circle. I peered curiously at Lord Ian and asked, “Are you the prince’s friend?”

“That’s right,” he answered without missing a beat.

Our conversation was short lived as another voice interrupted, “If your match is finished, move. You’re disrupting the other combatants by standing in the way.”

Lord Ian immediately corrected his posture and turned toward the man who’d snapped at us. Said man continued grouching, “Also, a military training area is no place for a girl. Didn’t anyone teach you that such behavior is unfit for a lady?”

I could already foresee the prince cutting in to defend me, so I shot my hand out and grabbed his to keep him from speaking. When the two of us turned to face the man addressing us, the first thing I noticed—the man’s most noticeable characteristic—was that he only had one eye. That single, mahogany-colored pupil burned with ambition. His face was peppered with scars that bespoke his experience on the battlefield, making for an impressive sight. The man’s entire body exuded a commanding aura, which made it clear how capable he was. It didn’t matter that he was nearing his seventies; he had the vitality of a fearless warrior still on active duty.

His white hair was clipped short, and he was only a bit taller than me. Most would consider him too petite to call himself a warrior. Yet not a soul in Sauslind—save for perhaps a newborn who might not know any better—would dare to underestimate this man. His gaze was so tense as he stared me down that the whole room seemed to go silent...until his eyes finally softened. “At least,” he added, “I know *I* taught you better than that, Eli girl.”

I broke out into a smile as I rushed over to him. “Grandpa Teddy!” In spite of him chastising me for my unladylike behavior, I threw my arms around him.

He chuckled as he lifted me up in the air with a strength one wouldn’t expect for someone of his age and size. “Oh! Looks like you’ve gotten a bit heavier since the last time I saw you, my girl. No surprise you’ve grown over the last four years. I hope you’re still the

same inside.”

“Y-You’re embarrassing me...!” I felt so ashamed with so many eyes on us that I had to protest, but he merely laughed at my reaction.

This man was General Theoden Bakula. Since he’d retired from the front lines, he was acting as a chief advisor to the Black Wing Knights, an appropriate title for a man his age. Still, there wasn’t a person on the Ars Continent who didn’t know who he was. He’d served the previous monarch, King Claus II.

Back then, our northeastern neighbor, Norn, had been enjoying a prosperous period. They’d joined forces with the former Kai Arg Empire and launched an invasion on our eastern border. The man who’d stopped their incursion with an overwhelming victory was General Theoden. His name had immediately spread as people referred to him as a hero.

The general had numerous other accomplishments as well, but his fighting style had earned him the name “Battle God.” The actual God of Battle was Alegga, whose incarnation in the human world was a black eagle. That was why the general’s order of knights eventually came to be known as the “Black Wing Knights.” They were an army that defended Sauslind’s eastern border. The two strongest military men in Sauslind were General Bakula, the Battle God of the East, and Earl Hayden, the Guardian God of the West.

Young men from across the country were attracted by the tales of Sauslind’s hero and tried to join the Black Wing Knights every year. The barrier for entry was so high that those without the proper skill weren’t even eligible to take part in the preliminary exam. As a result, the Black Wing Knights had a reputation for being the most elite in the kingdom.

As for why such a legendary figure was acquainted with someone like me? Well...

“I came all the way to the capital because I heard you’d come out to greet me, and yet the moment we arrived, they dragged us all to this indoor training area. Utterly ridiculous,” the old general grumbled.

After he returned me to the ground, I promptly apologized. “I’m sorry, but I was certain you wouldn’t arrive until evening.”

He chuckled. “We hurried once the snow started coming down hard.” The expression in his eye seemed to soften, filling with nostalgia as he gazed at me. “Eduard has lamented sending you to the capital because you haven’t gone home ever since.”

“Oh, Grandfather...” Four years had passed since I left, and as I recalled my elderly grandfather’s face, I felt my heart squeeze.

Though it wasn’t really public knowledge, General Bakula and my grandfather were old friends. When I was younger, the general would

randomly visit the Bernstein estate, so I'd grown to adore him as much as if he really were my grandfather. He would bring me tales from far away lands and different cultures, educating me on beliefs that had once been commonplace in days long past. He would also regale me with intriguing stories based on his own personal experiences. Soon I began to anticipate his visits, just as with my uncle who brought me accounts of his adventures in ancient ruins.

When I first read the war chronicles and gave the general my analysis, I could never have imagined he was the central figure depicted in them. I had spoken to him about flaws in the tactics of that historical battle and what foreign policies we could have implemented at the time. I was only an ignorant child back then, but what a thing to say to a modern war hero. Thinking back on it made my entire face flush with embarrassment.

Yet for his part, the general had quietly listened despite my immaturity, seeming amused as he'd nodded along. "I'd expect no less from a Bernstein," he'd said, sounding genuinely impressed.

Much like back then, he still treated me as though I were his grandchild, gently stroking my hair. "There's no greater joy for an old man than seeing his beloved family in good health. When my next mission ends, why don't the two of us go back and see him?"

"What?" I blurted in surprise, blinking.

Before I could respond, a hand slipped around my waist and pulled me away from Grandpa Teddy. A familiar aura encompassed me as a chillingly cold voice called out from behind, "General Bakula, per our agreement, I beat three of your knights. From here on out, other than your public duties, I'd like you to refrain from enticing Eli."

I could almost see the sparks flying as the general's gaze met Prince Christopher's, both men glaring. The former finally grunted, sounding displeased. "I'd always planned to choose one of my knights as a partner for her. Not only have you disrupted that, but now you're pulling this as well... You're a cunning fellow, I'll give you that." Despite addressing royalty, the general spoke bluntly.

I froze up, nervous about how the prince might respond to that.

Instead, a rather anticlimactic voice chimed in, "Hm, that's interesting."

As we were conversing in the middle of the building, the two wise men wandered over and joined us. Nearby was Earl Eisenach, the general of the imperial guard. He'd been the one who had led Grandpa Teddy and the Black Wing Knights here to begin with. Currently, it seemed he was gathering Lord Glen and the prince's personal guard together.

Doctor Harvey was the one who'd made the light-hearted remark a moment ago, and now he continued, "I heard you were acting as

Lady Elianna's guardian and that was why the other nobles agreed to recognize the prince's engagement to her four years ago. Am I mistaken?"

"What?" I gasped. I'd heard nothing about this before.

Orphen chuckled to himself and added, "Someone with a talent for laying groundwork had already set everything up, but Theoden was the one who sealed the deal by acting as your guarantor."

This was a shock to me. Not once since I had come to the capital had I noticed the general supporting me in the background. At the same time, it made a certain amount of sense. The Bernsteins were known for little else other than their love of books and didn't have a very strong position at court. I didn't believe what His Highness had said about selecting me as a way to balance warring political factions had been a complete lie, though. Nonetheless, Sauslind was relatively stable compared to the other countries on the continent. A recommendation from a prominent figure would be essential for convincing the other senior statesmen that I was a safe choice.

I stood there, feeling a bit lost.

The general's expression soured as he spat indignantly, "Back then, some emerging noble from the capital came to see me, acting dismissive of the Bernsteins. He asked, 'Do you know Elianna Bernstein?' Sounded so high-handed and pompous that I told him, 'I, Theoden Bakula, can vouch for her character.' I had no idea he was there doing a background check on her to see if she was qualified to marry the prince."

Oh goodness... The surprises never ceased. I cupped a hand over my mouth.

Apparently he'd been very worried about me when I debuted into society. He'd feared, seeing as how oblivious I was of the ways of the world and noble society, that I might land myself in trouble. Given how unambitious the Bernsteins were, there were many greedy nobles who saw us as eyesores, making us an easy target.

"Grandpa Teddy," I murmured quietly.

It was little wonder why then, after being visited by an uppity noble, the elderly general had responded emotionally without thinking the situation through.

He was trying to protect me?

A warmth welled up in my chest. I tried to approach him again, but a hand around my waist stopped me.

The prince had his usual business-like smile on, but there was nothing friendly in his voice as he spoke. "Persistence must be a characteristic unique to the elderly. I even willingly agreed to all of the conditions set before me and never once used your name or the hidden name of the Bernsteins. Eli and I worked together, using our

own strengths to gain her acceptance and acknowledgment from the people. Although, I suppose having obstacles to stand in our way has only helped our love grow even stronger. Right, Eli?" He kept me in his embrace as he leaned forward, peeking into my face.

The close proximity had me flustered. "Uh, um..."

The elderly general in front of us, who had more or less been called a hindrance just now, groused, "Orphen! What kind of education have you been giving your pupil?!"

"Hohoho," the wise man chuckled. "What can I say? He came to me this way."

Grandpa Teddy shook his head. "Hmph. That merciless, underhanded approach seems too similar to be a coincidence."

"Merciless? Whatever do you mean?" The two seemed to be old acquaintances and quickly launched into a casual back-and-forth.

Meanwhile, as if to add more fuel to the fire, the prince innocently asked me, "Eli, do you know what the saying is for these kinds of people?"

I blinked back at him.

A grin spread on his lips. "'The devil's children have the devil's luck.' In other words, bad people tend to thrive the most."

The three elderly men turned their gazes back to the prince.

Nearby, we could hear the echo of Earl Eisenach as he berated the guards he'd gathered up. "The only person besides Glen to win two bouts was the prince? This is unacceptable!" He scowled at them. "The imperial guard's duty, its very existence is for the purpose of protecting the capital and the royal family. Maldura's delegation is on their way. Do you really think we can welcome our archenemies here with you in this state? You lack motivation!"

My heart thudded, though this time for a very different reason. This was why the Black Wing Knights had come to the capital. This was why the prince had taken the initiative to show his prowess at the sword when he normally abstained.

I could hear the footsteps of dread and anxiety creeping up behind me, but they were drowned out by the passion in Earl Eisenach's voice. "Second division, you lot are attached to the prince and will have the most interaction with Maldura's delegation. You lack determination, grit, and motivation! I want you outside running laps. On the double!"

A panicked voice of protest rang out instantly—the ginger-haired knight, Lord Glen. "Father! Uh, sorry, I mean, General! While I understand where you're coming from, you're asking the impossible. Do you want to have men sent to the infirmary with frostbite?!"

"See, it's exactly that naive attitude of yours that caused your men to lose. The Black Wing Knights traveled through that blizzard to get

here. Don't get weak at the knees over a bit of snow! You need motivation! And guts!"

"Since when did you start buying into the 'where there's a will, there's a way' nonsense?!"

The two launched into what was essentially a family quarrel as the rest of the knights stood around and watched. Vice Commander Zack, who had come to retrieve me earlier, lamented to himself, "Nothing I did mattered..."

As the prince continued bantering with the three elderly men, I gently slipped my hand over the one he had around me. It was almost as if I was unconsciously clinging to him, hoping to borrow from that steadfast confidence he displayed.

Chapter 3: Seeds of Anxiety

After everyone left, I decided to head to my usual spot, traversing the corridors with my manservant close behind me. Grandpa Teddy and the Black Wing Knights had left to meet with the king and queen, who hadn't been able to receive them personally since they'd arrived ahead of schedule. A chamberlain had come to fetch the prince, urging him along to change out of his sweat-soaked garments.

Now that it was only me and Jean, I found myself steeped in thought. Suddenly, a suspicion occurred to me, and I turned to my manservant and asked, "Do you not like Grandpa Teddy?"

"Huh? What're you on about this time?"

"I've noticed this for a while now, but every time he comes to visit, you disappear off somewhere," I said. "Did he say some harsh things to you before?"

"Ah." My tall, gangly manservant paused to scratch the top of his head. His drowsy eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "He probably figured I wasn't suited to work at the Bernstein estate. Started drillin' me about my work history n'stuff."

"Your work history?" I echoed, eyes widening.

"Yep," he said, sounding bored with the conversation already.

I eyed him curiously. "But Jean...I thought you came to us through Earl Grantham's recommendation, from the region right beside us? Isn't that where you're from?"

"Yep."

The lack of interest he displayed only served to pique mine, especially for how long we had known each other.

As my mind landed on one possibility, my feet froze in place. I rounded on my heel to face him, expression turning serious as I addressed him. "Jean..."

The moment he saw me scrutinizing him, he steeled himself as he always did, suspicious of what I would say next.

I decided to get right to the heart of the matter of why he had really come to the Bernsteins' region. "Did you eat at a sweets store then run out without paying your bill?"

"What?!" His voice almost sounded hysterical as he shrieked at me.

I remained matter-of-fact as I pressed further. "There must have been a reason why Grandpa Teddy was asking you about your history.

Did you do something to get you driven out of the Grantham's region? It's not too late to confess, Jean. I promise, I will go with you and we can apologize to the owner together."

"Why does him questionin' me automatically make you assume I'm some kinda criminal who eats without payin'?!"

"Because," I deadpanned, "you love sweets."

For a long time now, Jean would polish off any sweets I received when I attended tea parties. Each time, he gave the curious pretext that he was "testing them for poison," though I hardly believed him.

"Or perhaps..." I decided to test the next possibility I had considered. "Did someone catch you taking a nap on the job and fire you?"

He started massaging his temples, giving me the same expression Lord Alexei did when he was battling a migraine. "So the possibilities are I either ate and ran or got fired? That's it? 'Sides, I don't think you should be the one nosin' around in other people's history, m'lady. I remember, you know. Back when we lived in your family's region, you kept goin' to this bookstore religiously after you mistook it for a library. You read every single book they had on their shelves. I heard rumors that because of you, that place closed down."

"Goodness," I gasped. Of course, I couldn't let that misconception continue. "Mister Sebas's shop closed because there was no one who could inherit it. I purchased every volume he had for our library. Such a shame, though; bookstores like his that deal largely with antiquated literature are rare."

"And you're the one who sat around in his store all day readin' for hours on end."

My cheeks heated at his accusation, and I leveled a glare at him. I knew bookstores existed back then, but the place had been so desolate. I never spotted any other customers inside. Naturally, I assumed his store was an annex of our library that dealt with ancient tomes. The old man who owned the place was so kind that he let me spend however long I wanted there. In retrospect, I realized that was probably because I was the regional lord's daughter, and the man was probably only showing deference because of my status.

Jean snorted in derision and I huffed back at him. "If I recall correctly, Head Maid Selma caught you sneaking food and raked you over the coals for it."

He stared back at me, dumbfounded for a moment, before he barked back (more angrily than I'd anticipated), "What're you talkin' about! That all happened because you and Lord Alfred did that old timey food experiment! And who was the only victim of that incident? Me! Because of you two, Miss Selma called me an absolute fool!"

"I would never 'experiment' with food. My brother and I simply

asked the head chef to try recreating ancient cuisine. You were the only one who ended up with a stomachache, Jean.”

“That’s ’cause I was the only one who made the mistake of eatin’ some of it! Besides, Miss Selma chewed you out, too. She forbade you from ever recreatin’ that old timey food again!”

Feeling indignant, I went silent.

My manservant was panting at this point from all the arguing, a menacing look on his face. The moment I went quiet, he let out an exhausted sigh. “Those old timey people you read about don’t have the same stomachs as those of us livin’ in the present, so just keep that in mind.”

He then launched into a long lament. “Tellin’ me this and that’s similar to acorns and flour and whatnot... Similar my arse.” All I really understood from it was this: Jean was intensely finicky when it came to food.

Once again, Jean let out a deep sigh, as if spilling out all the air his lungs could contain. “I’ll be frank...instead of worryin’ about my history, you should expend all that energy on a certain someone close to you. The world would be a lot more peaceful and happy that way. Besides...” As he mumbled to himself, his drowsy eyes narrowed, a malicious glint hidden deep within. “He’s the one closest to you, and yet he’s the only one who never suffers. Seems odd to me. Misfortune should be split between all of mankind equally. I’m not lyin’ back while they use me as a human experiment. That demon lord’s gonna have to get a taste of my pain. Like having a stomachache so bad that you can’t even eat your favorite food when it’s set in front of you. That grief, that sorrow... Nothing else compares...”

I stared at my manservant as he continued his bizarre mumbling, and suddenly the way I looked at him changed. Had he perhaps received some kind of divine revelation from the heavens while hanging around Orphen’s research society? Or perhaps was the medicine they’d casually slipped into the sweets and tea at the lab starting to show its effects?

As I continued gazing at Jean, I thought to myself, *I must inform Orphen about this.*

~.~.~.~

The moment I entered the archives, the scent of books teased my nose and tempted my feet to travel further in. Behind me, Jean yawned and wandered off to look for a place to take his afternoon nap.

The same routine as always, I thought to myself as I began searching for the book I desired, navigating the sea of tomes around me that were brimming with knowledge from our forebears. A calm

silence had settled over this ocean of shelves, each volume just waiting for me to unseal it and discover the secrets contained within. Among them might lurk a tempestuous whirlpool that could swallow the whole world up in its surging waves. The very thought caused my heart to stutter as I gently glided through the archives' waters. Around me, the books sang their siren's song, beckoning me to reach for them. I had to resist the temptation as my lips naturally curled into a smile.

Around the corner of one of the shelves, I caught a voice whispering. "...like that too?"

The hushed question earned a nod from the girl to whom it was spoken. "Yes," she murmured. I recognized both of their voices. "I could feel the tension in my father's letter. Our spies' reports weren't very promising, and he told me to stay in the capital. For him to say that... Don't you think it must mean my region's in danger?"

A gentle voice answered her anxious query, trying to comfort her. "Lady Anna..." Anyone with a discerning enough ear could hear the affection in his voice. He continued, trying to appeal to her sense of reason, "The delegation from Maldura plans to travel the bay and enter the country through Kelk Harbor. I understand why the people of the Edea Domain feel so alarmed, but there's no need to be so nervous."

Another low voice joined in to say, "The delegation's whole motivation for coming is to seek a way to foster good relations between us. I suspect the reason the earl asked you to stay here is because he wants you to watch how things play out for yourself."

At their reassurance, the woman's voice sounded more resolved and less panicked than it had moments before. "Yes, you're right. I apologize for causing such a fuss over something so silly."

"Not at all. I understand there are many like you at the palace who are feeling tense and uneasy. The only time a delegation from Maldura comes to Sauslind is when they need to clean up after one of the wars they've launched on us." The second man's calm voice continued, sharing information that almost sounded like it was for my benefit. "Actually, they began approaching us about this visit before the Holy Night's Banquet. Most likely—and keep in mind this is supposition—after they sounded us out during the Autumn Hunting Festival, they probably decided it'd be wise to make an official visit before the spring."

"Indeed," the other man's gentle voice agreed. "It makes sense. If they plan to attend the prince and Eli's wedding, it would help if they already have a link here. Though I can't deny the feeling that we're being conveniently swept along by their ulterior motives."

The other man chuckled, his voice low as he cleverly quipped, "Well, that's why you and the prime minister are formulating a way to

bargain an advantageous treaty for us, right? The Financial Affairs Office is also keeping an eye out to see what concessions are made so they can siphon as much money as possible to—oh, how rude of me. I simply heard the head accountant there has been staring at numbers all day, trying to figure out how they might raise tariffs. We have some eccentric people here at the palace. And so...” He turned, directing his words straight at me. “You need only focus on your own duties, Lady Elianna.”

I shrank back in surprise as their attention turned my way. Feeling awkward, I took a few steps forward to reveal myself fully. When I stepped out from the corner, I saw the exact three people I’d expected.

“Eli,” my brother said, extending his arms as he approached.

Lady Anna Hayden also gave a warm nod in my direction, not seeming the least bit upset that I’d rudely eavesdropped on their conversation.

The last of the three was the curator of the archives, Prince Theodore. His eyes looked like ultramarines and his hair had a deep, golden color to it. Part of his allure was his deceptively relaxed disposition which belied his true playful nature. He was also very popular among the women at court.

I shuffled closer and apologized for not announcing myself sooner, but Prince Theodore only smiled and shook his head. “No, I was the one who started this conversation where others might overhear it. I don’t mind.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “The fact that someone dragged you out of the Pharmacy Lab must mean General Bakula arrived, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” he hummed under his breath, contemplating something.

Before I could voice the niggling suspicion I had in my head, my brother offered me a gentle smile as he said, “Prince Christopher certainly does have a talent for pulling out his trump card at the perfect moment.”

As I stared back at him, his ashen eyes softened.

“Those in the military don’t think too fondly of Father,” he explained. “Hearing that Maldura was sending a delegation here only gave their faction more momentum. Some may have planned to use this opportunity to overthrow him. Perhaps they even intended to drive you out. But by revealing that one of their most influential figures is backing you...”

“Now it’s tough for them to make a move,” Lady Anna finished for him, impressed as she nodded to herself. “My father also made it clear he intends to attend your wedding. The military in the east and west have your back, and you have the support of the people as well. Yes,

indeed, the prince has set up a solid foundation for you.” Perhaps the reason she was able to make such a calm analysis was also why she was working in the Department of History Compilation. However, it also seemed the presence of those armed forces were part of what had allayed the fears she’d displayed earlier.

She continued, sounding surprised, “I didn’t realize you were old acquaintances with General Bakula.”

Alfred informed her, “More precisely, he’s an old acquaintance of our grandfather.” He gave a bitter smile. “I’m sure many will share your shock when they hear. Ever since Eli was named the prince’s betrothed, she has taken a firm stance against relying on the military. If people knew from the beginning that the general was supporting her, none of her statements or efforts would have had any meaning.”

If people knew I had the backing of a man who’d used military might to defend our country in the past, my advocacy for pacifism wouldn’t have held much weight.

“And so…” Alfred continued, reaching a hand toward me. I was lost in thought when his fingers pushed my hair back. It surprised me at first, but I found his warmth soothing. “That’s why I think the prince never mentioned Grandpa Teddy even when faced with the military’s harsh criticism. Though, I’m sure part of it was his agreement with our grandfather as well. The prince must not have wanted to make it public until it was firmly implanted in everyone’s minds that your biggest supporters are the people. I think the reason he called the general was partially to silence the opposing faction, but also because he wanted the best protection possible for you. Especially because he won’t be able to go with you when you leave.”

I was at a loss for words. It was all I could do to nod. The prince was always protecting me.

Alfred wore a pleasant expression on his face as he stroked the top of my head.

Lady Anna, seeming to have only now recalled what he was referring to, said, “Oh, that’s right, Lady Elianna. Your royal duties will be taking you to the Ralshen Region soon, correct?”

“Yes, although my primary objective in going is to visit the sickly Lord Bernard. I think I’ll just miss Maldura’s delegation as I’m leaving.”

I was the one who had spoken so strongly about fostering good relations with Maldura, and yet I wouldn’t be present when they came to the capital. That weighed on my mind, causing a resurgence of anxiety.

Prince Theodore gave a small, bitter smile as he said, “Under normal circumstances, it should be one of the members of the royal family visiting him. Instead, I’m afraid the burden must fall to you.”

“Oh, it’s no burden,” I assured him, shaking my head.

Lord Bernard was the younger brother of the former king, making him Prince Theodore’s uncle and Prince Christopher’s great uncle. Said former king (as well as the former queen) had already passed on to the next world. Lord Bernard was now the oldest surviving member of their family.

As Prince Theodore mentioned, originally it should have been Prince Christopher paying the elderly lord a visit, but instead he was going to remain here to deal with Maldura’s delegation. Thus, the duty had fallen to me. I would be his proxy, to put it in simpler terms. The anxiety I felt about fulfilling this duty was decidedly different from my apprehension about Maldura’s visit.

Nonetheless, I steeled my determination and said, “I will be a member of the royal family as well come spring. It’s only natural, given my status, for them to send me to visit Lord Bernard.”

Prince Theodore blinked at me a few times before flashing his charming smile. “Girls emerge from their shells to become beautiful butterflies so quickly. Can’t even turn your eyes away for a moment.” I stared back at him, puzzled by those words, but he just grinned teasingly and added, “I was looking forward to stealing you before you completely finished your metamorphosis, but alas, I value my life too much.” He chuckled.

After a moment, his voice turned more friendly and inviting. “Eli, even without you here, the things you have advocated for—a peaceful approach and friendly relations—have already begun to take root in the palace. Especially in the archives. Ever since you became the prince’s betrothed, you have been laying the foundation for Sauslind to be a civilized nation, and that’s become our ideal as well. We won’t let your efforts be in vain. We *will* lead the country forward, toward friendship with Maldura.”

There was a strength in his eyes so comforting I could feel it worm its way inside my heart. The warmth from my brother’s hand also brought me reassurance, and that relief was only further reinforced when Lady Anna nodded at me in agreement. I smiled back at them, grateful I had such trustworthy people I could count on. As long as they were here, there was nothing the capital had to worry about.

Even still, a shadow of unease continued to lurk within me, one I fought desperately to quell.

Chapter 4: Waiting for Spring

Lady Anna and my brother returned to work, and Prince Theodore and I launched into a discussion about books.

“You’re asking for a catalog of religions that have spread through the continent’s main highways? If we’re speaking about the period during the empire’s reign, I think Ryzanity is the only one you’ll find. You’re looking for ancient religions like the Gaelga?”

“No, not quite,” I said.

Something was niggling at the back of my mind, and I wasn’t entirely sure what it was when I decided to ask Prince Theodore about it. I figured if anyone would know the answer to my uncertainties, it would be the curator of the royal archives.

“A little bit ago, we spoke about *Furya’s Jar* and that led to talk about the medical text, *Ryza’s Guide*. Folk remedies at the time would have had a strong relation to their religion’s doctrine, so I wanted to look into it a bit...”

“Aha.” He nodded, despite my rather vague explanation. “*Ryza’s Guide*, hm? Then you’ll need a record of the merchants who traveled the highways during the empire’s reign. Those are kept in the vaults. I’ll be back in a moment with them.”

“All right.” I nodded, thanked him for his assistance, and then turned to browse the religious texts.

Strong gusts of wind rattled the glass on a nearby window, drawing my attention, and I struggled to suppress the unease that only continued to swell within me. It had all happened so fast; when the year started, news came of Lord Bernard falling ill, and talks began of Maldura sending a delegation to the capital shortly thereafter. They prefaced it as a courtesy visit to express their gratitude for the assistance we’d offered them when the cold front came through before. I suspected the internal situation there was just as my brother had surmised, but those not privy to such information were understandably shocked and anxious about the arrangement.

Excitement had been mounting in the capital as our spring wedding date approached, but Maldura’s visit had cast a shadow over that anticipation. There was a restlessness in the air as people hurriedly rushed to prepare. The archives felt far removed from all that hustle and bustle, wrapped in tranquility. Yet for as peaceful as this place was, that coil of dread I had fought so hard to erase

reappeared, winding tighter and tighter.

Maldura, to our northwest, was a warmongering nation. Thanks to the influence of the neighboring Kai Arg Empire, Ryzanity had proliferated there. Their country had a vast number of mines but the quality of the soil was ill-suited to farming. They relied entirely on their dealings with the empire and trade with the western countries and archipelagos, sending ships through the bay to reach them.

The bay was their only way to reach other countries; Sauslind stood in the way of a direct route to the open sea, and just beyond us stood the Miseral Dukedom. Besides, due to their isolationist policies, Maldura didn't possess naval expertise. Rather than trying to take on the Miseral Dukedom at sea, they instead proactively launched invasions on Sauslind, which was blessed with fertile land and was also connected to the main highways running through the continent.

During the previous king's reign, Sauslind and Maldura had gone to war countless times. People were worried that this same pattern would continue, either under the current monarch or his successor. Maldura wasn't the only one with a thirst for war. The militant faction in Sauslind was more anxious to battle our neighbors than befriend them, though I had openly expressed my condemnation of such actions.

Now that the prince had publicly revealed I had General Bakula backing me, he'd effectively reined in the militant faction. They might have otherwise tried to thwart our attempts at establishing peaceful relations. That was what my brother was trying to explain before. It certainly was an effective way of handling our political opponents—take one of the military powers they believed in and use it to talk them down.

A quiet sigh slipped past my lips.

I understood it would take every method at our disposal to establish peace with a neighbor we'd had hostile relations with for decades. Still, right now I felt utterly powerless. I didn't want to rely on military might to accomplish my goals, but I was helpless by myself. My opinion alone wouldn't be enough to stymie the militant faction. Prince Christopher had agreed with my opinions on fostering friendly relations, but in turn, that had caused him enormous hardship and trouble.

Before I could let another sigh spill out, I shook my head.

I have to get myself together. I can't let my insecurities get the best of me.

I glanced up at the shelves above me and plucked a few volumes I'd had my eye on. There was one more I spotted on a higher shelf, as well. Once I left the palace, I wouldn't have much time to enjoy reading. It was as though I thought picking these out and studying up

on areas of knowledge where I was lacking might somehow erase the budding unease within me.

Standing on the tips of my toes, I stretched as far as I could, but my fingers were frustratingly too short to reach the book I desired, brushing only the tip of its spine. Suddenly, another hand shot out over my head and retrieved it for me.

“Is this the one you wanted?”

My heart jumped into my throat at his unexpected appearance. As I stumbled, he caught me in his arms. Before I could even glance back to meet his gaze, that familiar scent flooded my nose and my pulse quickened.

“Did I surprise you? I’m sorry.”

I looked back to find him smiling gently at me, his blue eyes warm with affection. Blood rushed to my cheeks. “Not at all... Thank you, Your Highness.”

The prince always kept his guard up in public. Even when wielding that sword earlier, he’d had a bold, impenetrable smile on his face. As he stood before me now, he looked completely different. His golden hair had been neatly combed through, and the collar of his shirt was properly folded. The grace and composure he displayed made it impossible to imagine he’d been drenched with sweat before. His smile was so handsome it would send any woman’s heart pounding.

Even *I* thought it was high time I grew accustomed to his appearance and stopped acting so flustered. Every time I saw him, my heart would start pounding no matter how much I willed it not to. The novelty of it remained the same as when I first discovered my feelings for him.

I accepted the book from him and tried to move away, but the hand that had supported me moments ago kept a firm hold. He slid his arms further around me, wrapping me in his embrace. I tried to say his name but the words died on my lips. I could tell he had no intention of letting me go.

His voice was soft and quiet as he said, “You had such a troubled look on your face. If something is bothering you, talk to me about it.”

I wondered how long he’d been watching me for. I felt so embarrassed and awkward that I couldn’t say anything. Worse yet, my mind went blank when I realized we were pressed so closely together that he could feel my pulse.

He chuckled. “Am I troubling you again?”

“N-No...”

Obviously, my answer wasn’t entirely truthful, and he laughed again before releasing me. As he moved away, he took his warmth and smell with him. I grabbed his arm without thinking.

“Eli?”

I jumped with surprise as I realized what I’d done, but at the same time, I didn’t want him to leave, so I kept hold of his arm.

Still standing behind me, he chuckled again, sounding genuinely happy this time as he pulled me back into his arms. I could feel his lips press down against the top of my head. “The political world has been restless since the year began. I haven’t been able to take much time to rest because of that. If I’ve made you anxious as a result, I apologize.”

“Not at all.” I juggled the books I was carrying in one hand so I could use the other to caress the arm he had wrapped around my waist. The tension left my body as I felt the reassuring rhythm of his heartbeat against my back. “The reason the political world has been in such a state is partially because of me.”

“You’re talking about Maldura?”

I sucked in a breath, unable to say anything.

His gentle voice turned firm as he said, “Hey, Eli... You’re not going to cheat on me, are you?”

“What?!” I squeaked back, sounding like Jean had earlier. I whipped my head around to look at the prince, but his arms only tightened around me. “Wh-Why would you ask something like that?”

“Hmm...” His voice sounded eerily serious as he continued, “I have a bad feeling, that’s all. There’s a high probability that cretin will come along with the rest of Maldura’s delegation. General Bakula also said he wanted to choose your partner from his Black Wing Knights. Then there’s your first love whom I knew nothing about.”

“G-Grandpa Teddy wasn’t being serious, I’m sure. A-And I’m not really sure what my first love has to do with any of this.”

“No,” he said very decisively, with a gravity that implied this was a national concern. “This is a very alarming issue, Eli.”

“Huh...?”

Is it truly?

As the prince’s betrothed, did possible marriage talks from the past have any impact now? I couldn’t recall any princesses from history encountering issues because of their first loves.

While my mind spun in circles trying to decipher the meaning of his words, the prince finally burst out laughing behind me. That cooled my head instantly.

“Your Highness...” My voice was chillingly cold.

His arms squeezed around me. “Sorry, Eli. You are always so serious about everything. I couldn’t help myself.”

I’d noticed this before, but the prince had a sadistic side to him at times.

While I felt increasingly disgruntled by his teasing, I heard a small

chuckle trickle into my ear as he said, “I wasn’t being entirely dishonest though. Your first love has been weighing on my mind. I thought I knew everything there was to know about you.”

Those words stabbed me right in the chest. I squeezed his hand in mind. “I felt the same way. That was my first time seeing you act so close with anyone besides Lord Glen. Though when I thought about it, it shouldn’t have been all that surprising...”

Since becoming his fiancée, I had spent a lot of private moments with the prince outside of our royal duties. I knew who he was and wasn’t open with, what policies and principles he advocated for, and what future he envisioned for our country. I knew he had a habit of thinking two or three steps ahead of everyone else. Spending every day at his side, I thought of myself as almost part of his inner circle—that I knew everything there was to know about him. However, there was no way you could know everything there was to know about a person. How could you when you were two completely different people?

I stood up straight and glanced behind me, expression earnest. “It’s also weighing on my mind, actually. How did you, Lord Ian, and the rest of the Black Wing Knights become acquainted? How did you spend your time before the two of us became engaged? I want to know you more intimately. Could you share more of yourself with me?”

He swallowed hard, eyes wide. After a moment, he pulled one of his hands away from me to cover his face. Then a groan slipped out of his lips. “Why do you have to be so viciously tempting...? Who taught you that?”

Pardon?

“Don’t tell me that pervy old fa—I mean, nasty elder—ahem, Glen’s old professor, Doctor Harvey, hasn’t been filling your head with anything strange, has he? You haven’t...been playing doctor with him, right?”

Excuse me?

He sounded completely serious as he made his query, but I was so confused I had no idea what he was referring to.

“I don’t think Doctor Harvey has taught me anything of that nature. Um, Your Highness, did he play doctor with you?”

That dazzling smile returned to his face instantly. “Of course not.” He spoke as though he were completely chaste and uninterested in such activity. “That would be ridiculous. I’ve merely heard details from Glen. You needn’t familiarize yourself with such matters either, Eli. When the time comes and you want to learn, I’ll be happy to teach you.”

“Aha,” I said vaguely, nodding. Seeing how motivated he was, I

got the sudden desire to run but decided to change the subject instead. "Um...so where was it you became acquainted with Lord Ian and the Black Wing Knights?"

He stared at me for a moment. "Oh yes," he said finally, realizing that was the original topic I'd brought up. "Actually, my meeting with Ian had nothing to do with the Black Wing Knights. I only learned he'd joined them after the fact. As for the Black Wing Knights themselves, we became acquainted through my public duties. I would never have called them to the capital if not for our current situation."

The knights were the cornerstone of our eastern defenses. They were only ever called to the capital for essential affairs, such as the crowning of a new king. Their most elite members had been summoned to the capital in part to welcome Maldura's delegation. They served as a precaution and were imposing enough to discourage our potential new ally from doing anything rash. As for the Guardian God of the West, Earl Hayden, he was busy keeping the rest of Maldura in check at our border.

I went quiet. For diplomatic and political purposes, I understood why the prince had sent for them, but I couldn't bring myself to approve of his decision. My gaze dropped to the floor.

The prince's next words were like an arrow that went right to the heart of my growing anxiety. "You're worried that people are becoming increasingly reliant upon our military power, aren't you?"

I swallowed hard, squeezing my hand around the arm he still had wrapped around me. He'd hit the source of the apprehension I'd been feeling since the year began.

After we were informed that a delegation from Maldura would be visiting, the militant faction began to gain momentum. Everyone's concern and interest began turning toward our military power. When I saw that happening, I started to think we were being too hasty. Memories of war with Maldura were still too fresh in people's minds, and we'd had a long history of being hostile neighbors. Perhaps it was premature to push for friendly relations right now.

"First," I said, "I wanted us to acclimate people through the trading of culture and goods, so they could soak in the idea that Maldura isn't an enemy anymore. Then we could make a fair treaty with them once everyone knows they're just another country with different beliefs and standards than we have here. I feel we should wait for that to take root before proceeding..."

"Yes," he said in a soft voice that soothed my restless heart. "You're right. Considering our long and storied past with them, discretion is paramount. That's why you feel nervous and think everything is moving too fast. Correct?"

Hearing him clarify the root of my concern was reassuring. The

tension lifted from my shoulders. "Yes..."

There was no reason to turn down friendship, as my brother had said. However, it did feel like the Maldurans were trying to exploit the situation for their own motives.

"For Maldura to hasten things along makes me think they must have some other purpose in mind," I confessed. "I can't help but doubt them."

"Indeed." The prince laid his other hand over mine and entwined our fingers. My cheeks heated a bit with embarrassment.

"Hey, Eli," he continued, "don't try to carry the weight of everything by yourself."

"What...?"

"Maldura's delegation is coming here because you advocated for peace with them," he said. "And since they're using that as a front to hide their real aim, you feel like it's your fault for having proposed friendship with them. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

Sadly, I couldn't deny that. I was the one who'd given them the excuse to come here, and yet I wasn't even going to be here when they arrived. If anything were to happen, it would be my responsibility, but I was leaving it all for the prince to take care of.

I pursed my lips tight.

"Eli," the prince cooed in a gentle, soothing voice, "take a deep breath."

My eyes flew open, and he repeated his request. I acquiesced and did as he asked, drawing in air before expelling it again.

As I did so, the prince froze, staring at me as if he'd just noticed something. "You have a really sweet smell coming from you. Is it something you ate?"

"Oh," I gasped. I tried to lift my hand to cover my mouth, but our fingers were still woven together so I couldn't. "My brother gave me some candy a few moments ago."

In fact, he'd been quite forceful when he popped it into my mouth, saying, "Jean isn't your pet, so don't be feeding these to him. You need to give your own brain some nourishment."

It had already melted fully by now, but it was improper behavior for a lady.

As I recalled that uncomfortable memory, the prince hummed under his breath, a mischievous smile stretching across his lips. "Care to give me a taste as well?"

"What?"

By the time that word left my mouth, his face had already inched close to mine, and I could feel his tongue run across my lips. When he finally pulled away, he was grinning triumphantly as if his little prank had succeeded.

“Mm,” he said, whispering in a low voice, “sweet enough I could get addicted to the taste.”

I think I'm going to pass out. Your Highness, would you mind terribly if I just collapsed right here?

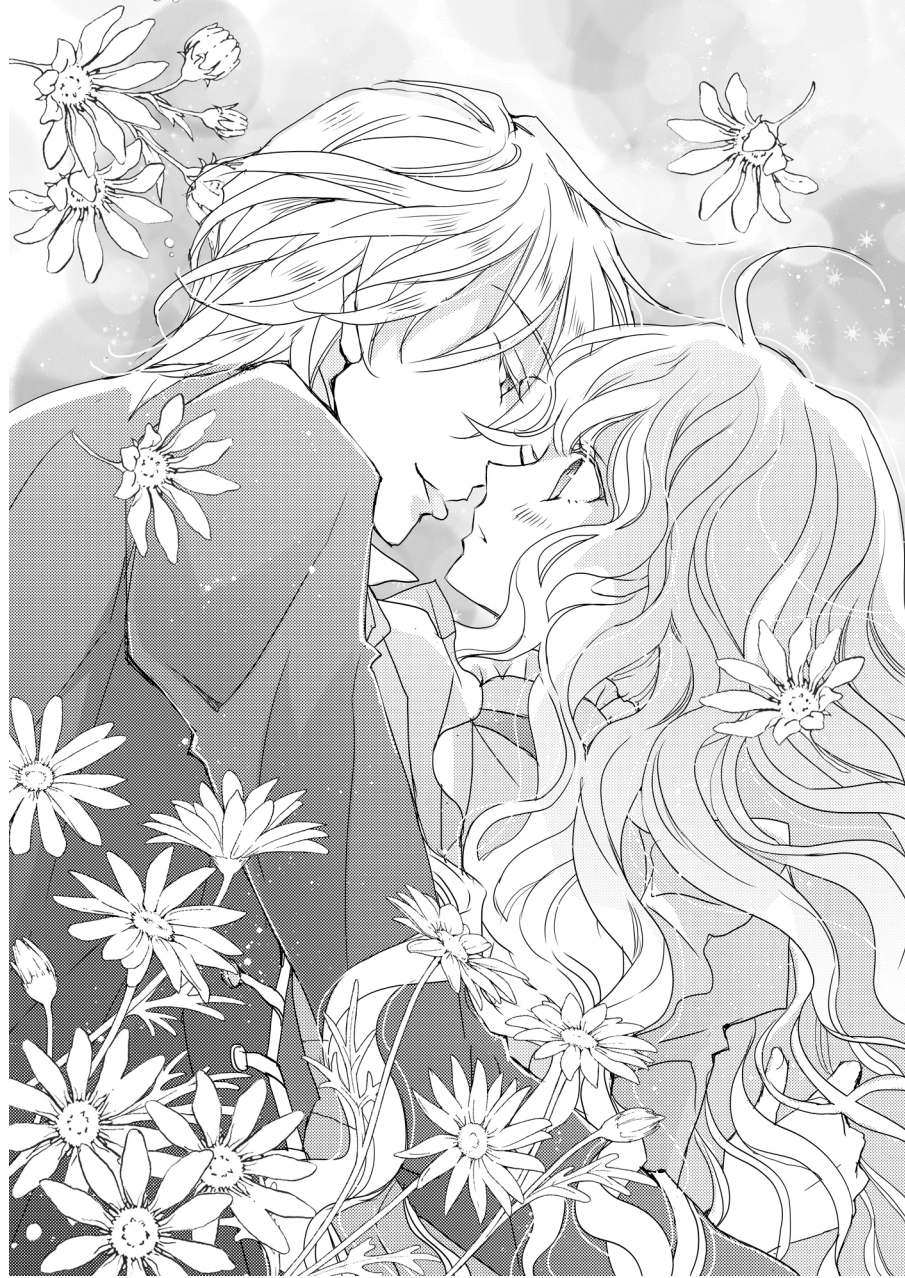
I froze stiff as a statue. I knew my face had turned red as a tomato because I could see my reflection in the prince's eyes. My heart was pounding so furiously I felt all the air leave my lungs and thought I might really faint after all.

He chuckled to himself as I finally returned to my senses and remembered to breathe.

Feeling vexed, I murmured, “That was unfair.”

“Hm?” The way he replied in such a playful tone made me resentful.

I glanced up at him. “You're always so composed, and I'm always so flustered... I want to make you lose your cool, too.”



His blue eyes went wide with surprise, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "You want to make me lose my cool? How?" His expression was serious as he awaited my answer.

I told him, very matter-of-factly, "I'll catch you in the act with another woman."

His shoulders jumped in an almost comical way. All of the excitement he'd displayed moments before faded as he staggered in place. "That's...not quite the direction I'd hoped for, Eli." His voice was thick with sadness and he mumbled.

I ignored that and returned to his earlier question. "The same way you worry I might not stay faithful, I'm also concerned that you might find someone else while I'm gone. Your Highness, you're too..."

You're too good for me.

He was already popular in high society; I knew that. If some of the other ladies were to see how handsome he looked wielding a sword, I was sure their passion for him would only burn stronger. Someone among them might seriously make a move on the prince. Recalling how gallant he'd looked earlier, I could feel my heart tighten at the thought of losing him.

A sweet voice trickled into my ear from behind. "Well? I'd like to hear you finish that sentence, Eli."

My pulse jumped again. I was so tongue tied I couldn't form a response.

Prince Christopher chuckled under his breath and squeezed his arms tighter around me. "You want to see me lose my composure and be completely flustered? All right, then. You made that cruelly seductive comment earlier, and we won't be able to see each other for a while, so why don't I prove my love to you? You'll never have to doubt whether I'll be faithful or not again."

"Um...Your Highness?" I felt the sudden urge to retreat and had to fight to keep myself from moving.

I get the feeling I've stepped into dangerous territory without realizing it.

"I..." The words trailed off, but I quickly blurted out the rest of my feelings. "I'm not confident in myself. It wouldn't be surprising to me if you developed feelings for someone else...that's all."

No matter how I might try, I couldn't feel confident in myself. Because...

"And why is that?" His voice was quiet as he urged me to continue, those blue eyes staring at me expectantly.

I felt tears well up as I said, "I don't want to leave all of the responsibility to you, Your Highness."

My advocacy was the reason Maldura's delegation was coming

here, but the prince was the one taking charge of the matter. All I did was cause him grief and bring him trouble. Wouldn't he eventually lose all affection for me at this rate? That was a fear I simply couldn't shake off.

"...Ngh." I bit down on my lip, trying to hold the tears in as I cast my eyes down.

You have no right to whine to him or cry like this, I thought as I untangled myself from his arms and scrubbed a hand across my now wet cheek.

The prince's head suddenly descended toward mine. He planted a kiss right on the edge of one of my eyes. When I looked up in surprise, I found him gazing back at me with intense affection. I tried to whisper his name, but his lips caught mine in a heated kiss, as if to reassure me. My eyes closed automatically and my heart sang. I could feel his love, and it was healing for me.

As he moved away, I opened my eyes again. The first thing I saw were his vivid blue eyes—so bright they engraved themselves into my heart.

"I feel the same, Eli," he said, returning the same sentiments I'd shared moments ago. "I don't want to put everything on your shoulders either, so please don't carry the burden all by yourself."

His affection was so profound, so all-encompassing that I felt the tears start falling again. I struggled to blink them back.

Prince Christopher smiled at me, reaching a hand up to wipe the wet trails running down my cheeks. "Just as you don't want me to take everything on, I don't want that for you, either. You are not solely responsible for Maldura's delegation coming and the people's hearts changing as a result."

He gently chastised me for being so conceited, but at the same time, he accepted my tendency to get worked up over things prematurely. His eyes—which reminded me of a cloudless, sunny sky—seemed to see through me, straight to my heart.

"Eli, I think we're standing on the precipice of a generational change right now. History is being made. Alone, anyone would be powerless to fight the raging current. They would drown. But together, don't you think we can overcome this?"

The feelings that welled up in me turned to tears that I forced myself to swallow back. In times like these, I always felt so grateful that Prince Christopher was the man I fell in love with.

"Yes. Yes, absolutely, Your Highness." My lips trembled as I tried to force them into a smile.

The prince grinned at me and pressed his lips to my forehead. "I really don't want you to leave the palace. I'm the one getting you wrapped up in the royal family's affairs. The Ralshen Region where

Lord Bernard resides has a bit of a troubled past. I'm afraid they won't treat you kindly because you're my betrothed, but there's no other suitable person to send besides you."

I could feel the concern in his voice. Although I'd brooded over not wanting to leave everything to the prince, he was entrusting me with an exceedingly important duty. I was sure that was proof of his faith in me.

"You're right." I nodded.

The conflicted expression on his face finally eased. He tucked his hand into his chest pocket and produced a small bag, which he held out toward me.

"What's this?"

"A charm," he said. "When you're backed into a corner and desperately need help, open this. I don't think that time will ever come, but just in case."

Though I found it curious he was offering me such a thing, I thanked him and accepted it.

"Eli?" His voice was so strong and filled with warmth as he called my name. "I will handle what happens at the palace with Maldura and take full responsibility for it. I want you to deal with the Ralshen Region. Can I entrust that task to you?"

"Yes," I said, staring right into his eyes.

He gave me another one of his vibrant smiles. Then his voice turned more serious as he said, "Elianna, there is one thing I want you to etch into your heart so you never forget. *You* are my queen. You're the only person I want by my side. Eli... Elianna, my Bibliophile Princess." Prince Christopher gently caressed my cheek, and I could feel my heart stutter in response.

I peeled my gaze away from him, my voice feeling a bit raw as I said, "I understand."

His gaze softened as he watched me, but then he let out a small sigh. "It's vexing... We haven't even reached spring and yet there are so many annoying pests wriggling out of every crack and crevice. Still, Eli, once this is over, all we have to do is wait for the day of our official ceremony. I want you to prepare yourself for that." There was a teasing tone to his words, but the passion in his eyes was genuine. I felt my pulse drum even faster.

The prince was entrusting me with an extremely important duty. He was recognizing me as his partner, that we'd be walking down this path together. I felt the same way—carried the same anticipation for our wedding.

As I stood there, captured by his beautiful blue eyes, I plucked up the courage and said, "I'm also anxious for spring to come, Your Highness... Prince Christopher."

“Eli...” Joy filtered through his husky voice as he spoke my name, a broad, earnest smile on his face. I found myself smiling, too.

Romance filled the air around us. I could feel a heat in the prince’s hand and from his breath as he leaned close. The way it caressed my skin sent my heart aflutter as I closed my eyes. Right as the warmth of his lips approached mine...

“Eli, I found the materials you wanted in the vault, but many of them are written in Quetzal, so...” Prince Theodore stepped around the corner of the shelves, and the moment he spotted us, he froze. “Oh...” He remained composed as he cleared his throat and said, “Pardon me, I’ll wait. Do continue.”

Immediately, I noticed veins bulging on the prince’s forehead, an almost audible crack echoing. He languidly slipped away from me, righting himself. The expression on his face reminded me of Lord Alexei.

Those two are definitely related by blood, I thought.

“Was that on purpose?” the prince asked. “It was, wasn’t it? I’d bet ten thousand dora that it was. I should’ve known you’d sell out to those tanuki and choose them over me. Rotten old man, with your fake-polite demeanor. You’ll die a lonely death, I swear it.”

Your Highness, that’s hardly an appropriate way to talk to him...

“I’d thank you to kindly refer to me as a refined older gentleman rather than an old man,” Prince Theodore quipped, looking as amused as he always did in these situations.

I hid my face in the prince’s arms as I waited for the blush to recede from my cheeks. I was happy His Highness had made no move to slip away from me. It was almost as if he were holding me to reassure me that this was where I belonged. Silently, I swore to myself I would do my utmost to fulfill my royal duties so I could return to these arms. Strength filled me, warm and comforting.

Chapter 5: Princess Training on the Road

Laughter echoed inside of the coach.

“Exactly right.” The woman speaking was just past middle-aged, with such a commanding presence it surpassed everyone else’s. In Sauslind’s high society, her influence came second only to Queen Henrietta. Her full name was Rosalia Strasser, but she was more widely known as Duchess Strasser, the mother to Lord Alexei and Lady Therese.

She had blonde hair peppered with streaks of white and eyes like a lake in winter, making her seem cold and aloof. Lord Alexei resembled her in the face, as she had gorgeous, chiseled features. Long ago, she’d been given the honorable title “the Frozen Rose.” Even past her prime, she still retained her beauty.

Currently, my entourage and I were midway to our destination, intending to visit the sickly Lord Bernard. The inside of our carriage was so luxurious and warm that it was hard to believe we were traveling in the middle of winter, surrounded by a bunch of guards to keep us safe.

The one livening up the conversation was the aforementioned woman, Duchess Rosalia. Those acquainted with her would have found nothing amiss about the conversation. As a former princess of the kingdom, she was incredibly elegant and refined, which was why she was so known for appearing distant and difficult to approach. However, those who befriended her would find she enjoyed engaging in immodest conversation.

“Therese’s morning sickness was so bad that for a bit there she wasn’t able to eat at all, you know? When it finally improved, almost as if on reflex, she began gorging herself on her favorite foods. To no one’s surprise, she’s been regularly experiencing stomachaches as a result.”

Recalling the turmoil from a few days prior, I quietly giggled to myself, careful not to make my mirth too apparent lest I offend the duchess.

The young lady at the center of our current conversation was Lady Therese Ardolino, who’d been there to see us off when we departed the capital. I had very few friends, but I counted her among them. She was pregnant and due to give birth at the beginning of summer. Since

this was her first time, she'd been causing an endless amount of trouble to those around her.

In response to Duchess Rosalia's casual remark, Lilia, who was accompanying me as one of my maids, said, "Oh, yes. The other day Earl Ardolino looked white as a sheet as he stormed the palace and dragged some of the doctors out with him. I wondered what all the fuss was about." She spoke with ease, unintimidated by the duchess despite having only met her a couple of times prior.

Duchess Rosalia's smile broadened. "One of the panicked servants from their home sent a messenger to the palace to inform the earl. My husband and I were meeting with Queen Henrietta when I heard, and I wondered what could possibly be wrong. My husband, ever the worrywart, began shrieking for them to 'call a midwife,' even though she isn't due to give birth for several more months. Honestly, men always lose their cool when you actually need them. They're utterly worthless." She spoke the words without mercy or compunction, as if off-handedly stating a fact. I felt a little awkward listening.

Her two maids merely giggled, as if accustomed to her blunt remarks. Their manners were as refined as any maid in the palace. As I found myself impressed by how well they conducted themselves, Duchess Rosalia turned her smile toward me.

"I heard he caused some trouble for you as well, Lady Elianna. You were meeting with my son when Earl Ardolino barged in, yes? I was told he pressed you for answers as to how a woman experiencing her first pregnancy might cope with stomach pain. You're not a doctor, for goodness sake. I felt so embarrassed I almost blushed on his behalf when someone relayed the incident to me later."

Before I could shake my head and reassure her, Lilia burst into laughter. "The maids are still gossiping about it. Earl Ardolino has a scowl permanently etched onto his face, and yet the moment he heard about his wife, he looked like he'd seen a ghost! He must really love Lady Therese."

"Oh?" The duchess wore a mischievous grin, brimming with curiosity as she teased my young maid. "I believe the same could be said for Lady Elianna, no? Prince Christopher called the general known as a Battle God to defend her on her trip, *and* he even sent my son—his precious right-hand man—along with us, too. The one who's really loved and protected here is Lady Elianna, more so than my daughter."

Hearing how our relationship looked to outsiders made me flush with embarrassment. Only a few hours ago, His Highness had hesitated to release me from his embrace even though so many people had been watching us. Eventually Grandpa Teddy had barked at us to break it up.

That topic became the central focus for the next few minutes of conversation. I was afraid they would keep repeating it when one of the duchess's senior maids added, "People have been talking about what perfect timing it was for Lady Therese to get pregnant. It's a prime time for childbirth if you're concerned about the future, at least according to rumor."

I tilted my head, confused as to what she was inferring.

She laughed at my reaction and smiled warmly as she said, "You and Prince Christopher will surely have children of your own soon enough. Other nobles are hoping that if their offspring are close in age, they'll be able to befriend yours."

"What...?" My jaw dropped. The conversation took me completely by surprise. I even forgot to blush.

Although our official wedding would take place in the spring, we still had some time between now and then. Children were even further off than that. Besides, she was speaking as if people were already anticipating a child I wasn't even pregnant with yet. Perhaps that was natural for nobility, but my mind hadn't quite digested the reality of what was happening around me.

Across from me, Lilia sighed in exasperation. "I don't understand how you can be so oblivious when it comes to things that relate directly to you, Lady Elianna. The reason so many nobles have been announcing their engagements since the Holy Night's Banquet is because they're anticipating your marriage to the prince. Everyone has realized how solid your relationship is and are now planning for the future."

I nodded, feeling a bit numb from the shock at this point.

Duchess Rosalia's voice sounded relaxed as she said, "Miss Lilia is right. Since the new year, talk has turned from engagements to pregnancy and birth. On that note...I do hope you'll share. How are things progressing with you two?"

"Progressing? I'm not sure what you mean?" I furrowed my brows at her, unsure where this was headed.

"Goodness." Duchess Rosalia so resembled her daughter the way her eyes lit up with curiosity. "Why, I'm referring to the possibility of a child between His Highness and yourself, of course."

The polite, lady-like smile on my face froze in place. I should have given the formal response of, "I expect we'll conceive sometime after the ceremony." But the words wouldn't come out. I saw the eagerness in her eyes, and my shy nature got the best of me.

Come to think of it, ever since I'd become close with Lady Therese, the duchess had been showing up at our tea parties to join her daughter in teasing me.

"Well?" she asked, prompting me to answer her. She was being

even more persistent than usual. "This is just between us girls. I know how infatuated Chris is with you. It wouldn't be outrageous for me to think you two have already crossed that line, would it?"

"Um, I suppose..." I practically squeaked the words out like a mouse, as embarrassing as it was to admit.

I almost wanted to collapse right there, much like I had a few days prior when the prince held me in his arms, but I tried to focus on working my brain instead... Why was Duchess Rosalia bringing this up all of a sudden?

While I sat there looking troubled, Lilia and the duchess's younger maid turned bright red as they waited anxiously for me to give a precise answer. Honestly, my cousin wasn't being any help here at all.

The other, senior maid gave a hearty laugh before stepping in to my rescue. "You've made Lady Elianna uncomfortable."

Duchess Rosalia breathed a sigh, now bored with the conversation. She regarded both Lilia and me with disappointment. "When I was your age, plenty of girls were getting married and giving birth. I should be surrounded with grandchildren by now. How greatly times must have changed..." Her voice held a somber note as she spoke.

"Uh, um," Lilia stammered, trying to show some consideration by changing the topic. "I hear that Lord Alexei has no shortage of marriage proposals from the ladies, not unlike Lord Glen. It certainly would have made sense for him to have a child before Lady Therese."

In that instant, the air in the carriage seemed to freeze over.

Although I managed to maintain a smile on my face, I was inwardly panicking as I said, "People do liken Lord Alexei to Alepatos, the god of intelligence who supports the almighty Dora. Alepatos was known for his pursuit of knowledge above all else. Perhaps Lord Alexei will get married in the future, but for the moment I suspect he is enjoying his work."

The moment she realized I was covering for her discourteous remark, Lilia turned pale. I gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Indeed," the duchess's senior maid responded smoothly. "Lord Alexei is known for being very strict and invested in his work. Although there's been no shortage of marriage talk surrounding him, the young noble ladies have consistently given him a wide berth. The average marriage age is increasing nowadays. The lady from House Odin who saw us off at the capital was one such example of that." She paused and then said, "I wonder if part of that is your support for women and midwives to become medical workers, Lady Elianna."

"Oh yes," said the younger maid, who wore a broad smile on her face. "Giving birth is extremely important and can be life-threatening for the mother and the child. Yet the midwives who assist with this

are always looked down upon in the medical community. Doctors with intimate knowledge about diseases and injuries are more respected, giving them this odd sense of superiority. But every life is equally as precious as any other.”

Her words, while unexpected, left a deep impression on me. I smiled at her, and in turn, the young maid shyly grinned back at me.

“That’s why I was so happy about the policy you helped support,” she said. “I come from a family of midwives. My mother is one as well, employed by Lady Therese. They may not be doctors, but they’re indispensable when it comes time for a woman to give birth. It always irritated me to see them discriminated against.”

Although they had medical expertise, their knowledge leaned solely toward birth, and so midwives weren’t recognized as actual doctors. In the past, there was even a period where such women were referred to as witches—both awed and feared. But this young lady had spoken the truth: every life was equally precious.

“You’re right,” I mumbled to myself, fondly recalling how I’d first begun sponsoring that policy last summer. “Even in medicine, there are specializations—those who focus on medicines to cure illness and those who focus on the best treatments for injuries. If there are so many different paths available, then it’s only natural we would have professionals versed in specific areas. The doctors serving the palace no doubt have knowledge about birthing, but the reality in cities and towns is different. Many still rely upon midwives.”

This was also likely because birth involved the privacy of the mother, so many men were historically excluded from attending or witnessing it. Women with comparable knowledge were considered a nuisance in the male-dominated medical world.

As in the case of this young maid’s family, many midwives passed their career and knowledge on to their daughters, keeping it running down family lines generation after generation. But why didn’t they use what they knew to spread awareness? It *needed* to be shared. Before we were men or women, we were people foremost, and lives were at stake.

“I’ve heard in some remote villages where there are no other doctors, people turn to midwives for medical help,” I said. “I thought it was of paramount importance we open the door of medical science to them. Ordinarily, the correct response would be to increase the number of doctors in the country, but our only option at present is to rely on those who possess some knowledge already. Those who take pride in their work as midwives may see what I’ve done as reckless. However, I believe those juggling lives in their hands can only stand to benefit when equipped with more information.”

Ever since the onset of the Ashen Nightmare sixteen years ago, I

had strongly desired one thing: for medical knowledge to be shared as widely as possible.

“Hoho.” Duchess Rosalia giggled as she recalled something. “I heard there were those who opposed your measure, claiming, ‘Midwives who don’t have medical knowledge have no right to call themselves doctors.’ Nitwits, the lot of them. So caught up with maintaining current regulations they can’t even entertain the idea that a different course of action might be better. I was told the prince silenced them by saying, ‘Then why don’t you all become doctors and station yourself in those remote villages where they have only midwives to service them?’ I agree with him. Those who are too drunk on their own power to exercise some empathy for others would do well to experience that situation for themselves.”

I smiled bitterly. Medicine was a career path involving other people’s lives, and it took no small amount of time and effort to achieve the expertise needed to be a doctor. Those who did so were proud of their profession, and it was no wonder they found my measure difficult to stomach. However, that didn’t change the fact that midwives were already being called on to fulfill the role of doctors across the country.

There was strong conviction in the young maid’s voice as she said, “I agree with your policy, Lady Elianna. There are those who complain that women are more suited for supporting roles, such as being a nurse, but honestly, my grandmother was in the exact opposite corner. She said there was no point in us trying to compete with men to stand in the medical field. But she had novice doctors pleading with her to impart her knowledge on them. In that case, I think women ought to break into the male-dominated medical field with their own specialized knowledge and make a place for themselves there. Men *should* feel intimidated by us. It’s because we’re women that we’ve inherited knowledge they don’t possess.”

Her words were so stirring, my eyes widened in surprise. Beside me, Lilia broke out into laughter.

The senior maid smiled as she turned the topic back to its original point. “The more women have opportunities to become doctors and practice, the higher the average marriage age will soar. I heard Lady Pharmia from House Odin is interested in becoming a doctor as well.”

“Indeed,” Duchess Rosalia said with a small sigh. She glanced over at me briefly. “That girl is naturally a diligent person. If I’m not mistaken, Lady Elianna, you introduced her to a medical facility in the capital. Ever since, she’s been frequenting the place, and rumors have started among the people. Surely you didn’t need to go out of your way to give Duke Odin even further cause to resent you.”

Her words made me recoil, but I was quick to explain, “I’ve heard

Lady Pharmia's younger brother isn't in good health. She's been interested in medicine for some time now. And so I..." I didn't think I'd made a mistake by doing what I'd done, but my voice tapered off nonetheless.

The duchess sighed once more, but there was almost something sympathetic and gentle about it this time. "You truly are too soft-hearted. On the surface, Duke Odin is giving you and the prince his blessing, but surely Queen Henrietta has told you already that he's only waiting for the perfect opportunity to pull the rug right out from under you."

I pulled a face.

Queen Henrietta originally hailed from House Odin. They were an ancient and honorable noble house, one who could trace its roots directly back to the royal family. The current duke was Queen Henrietta's older brother (making him Prince Christopher's uncle). Their house had once enjoyed an increase in influence due to their connection to the royal family, but when Her Majesty took ill with the Ashen Nightmare, her failing health negatively impacted their hold on power. Presently, House Odin presided over the western region where Kelk Harbor was located and maintained good relations with the Miseral Dukedom due to familial ties there.

House Odin was highly conservative and placed great value on old bloodlines, such as the royal family's. When His Highness and I were first engaged, House Odin was the one who protested the loudest, or so I'd heard.

After the way they'd treated her in the past, Queen Henrietta had put some distance between herself and her family, but the influence House Odin maintained was not something that could be so easily ignored, even as diminished as it was now. Hearing that I'd directly stepped on the lord's toes by interfering with his daughter did give me pause. However...

"Lady Pharmia is also one of my friends," I said.

Four years ago when I was selected to be the prince's betrothed, Lady Therese was the first person I befriended. Her frank, honest nature reeled me in, and as the two of us drew closer, she introduced me to another one of Prince Christopher's cousins—Lady Pharmia.

Like Lady Therese, she was also nineteen years old. Her blonde hair was so dark it verged on almost reddish-brown, and like Lilia, she had hazel eyes. The most noteworthy part of Lady Pharmia's appearance for me was the mole just beneath her eye, but otherwise she was a very reserved and quiet individual. Unlike me, she was skilled at embroidery and loved music. She was also very ladylike and thoughtful, making her a comforting person to be around.

"Lady Pharmia has such a keen eye I thought she would be able to

point out what areas our medical facility could improve upon,” I continued. “Most importantly, she was very proactive about wanting to get involved.”

Secretly, I wondered to myself if Lady Pharmia didn’t have her own path she wanted to pursue, similar to Lady Anna. Although I wasn’t as close to her as I was to Lady Therese, the two of us were still good friends. When I was completely lost at high society events, Lady Pharmia would always casually step in to look out for me.

Perhaps my actions had created an opportunity for a noble lady of an esteemed house such as her to spend more time in town with people rather than getting married. If that was cause enough for Duke Odin to resent me, then I had no regrets.

Duchess Rosalia had a pensive look in her eyes as she softly exhaled. “Yes, I suppose you must have had your reasons for doing that. I have no business criticizing you if that’s the case. Unfortunately, sometimes people’s best intentions don’t always turn out the way they might hope.”

I tilted my head, unsure of who she was referring to, but she sighed again and seemed to gather herself. Her eyes had turned serious once more. She had the dignified air you would expect of a noblewoman operating in high society.

“Miss Lilia,” she said, “I know you are enjoying your work as a maid at the moment, but if you aren’t careful, you’ll end up the same as my son. Well, perhaps not *exactly* the same. Alexei was engaged once before, only things went south.”

“What...?” Lilia’s jaw dropped.

Apparently she didn’t know. To tell the truth, I had only learned about this recently in connection with my official duties.

Duchess Rosalia remained nonchalant, nodding as she explained, “My son has a dark history with the Ralshen Region. The girl he was engaged to was originally from here. That seems to be the reason he refuses to settle down with anyone.” There was some unspoken nuance there, as if she was determined to temper the obstinance out of Lord Alexei.

I shrank back, feeling a cold sweat on my brow, though I was accustomed to such behavior from her by this point.

“That reminds me, Lady Elianna. The queen was concerned about leaving this errand to you during such a crucial period. You are supposed to be in the midst of princess training right now,” said the duchess.

“Oh no, it’s quite all right,” I said quickly. For as dense as I was, I still had a bad feeling about where this was going. The carriage left little room for me to run, but I was desperate for escape.

A smile slowly crawled across Duchess Rosalia’s lips. The chilling

look in her eye as she stared me down made the epithet “the Frozen Rose” fit her all too perfectly.

“Thus,” she continued, ignoring what I’d said, “Queen Henrietta has left the task to me. We will be carefully and meticulously going over your training throughout our trip. But for now, there’s one thing in particular I would like to focus on.” She paused, her words highly suggestive as her eyes lit up with amusement. “Let’s learn about how to become more intimate with your partner. That way we can surprise the prince once your duties are over. You know, Her Majesty and the king are anxious to see their grandchildren as quickly as possible.”

If her sudden proclamation was anything to go by, this trip was sure to be an arduous one for me.

Chapter 6: The Royal Family's Ill Connection

The Ralshen Region was located right next to the Azul Region, placing it at the border of Norn. Under normal conditions, it would take a carriage from the capital ten days to reach this place. It would only take three in cases of an emergency if the fastest horses on hand were sent, but it was taking us even longer than usual given how deep the snowfall was this time of year.

Actually, the Black Wing Knights made their home here in the Ralshen Region, defending our eastern border. It would have been faster for Grandpa Teddy to go straight back to the Ralshen Region without us, but his knights had been called to the capital for a special mission. Since he was supposed to accompany us for protection, he was taking a roundabout way to get back.

For now, let's rewind to a few days ago before I left the palace...

I was seated in Lord Alexei's office, in the middle of a meeting. The lord in question had just recently turned twenty-five years old. He was a young man known for his intelligence and talent. He was refined and handsome, with icy blue eyes and jet black hair, though he had something of an aloof air about him. He was equally cold toward everyone (regardless of gender), which had earned him the moniker "Ice Scion."

For the purpose of our trip, His Highness was sending Lord Alexei to oversee our journey and to support me in political matters. My duties included attending the memorial service in the Ralshen Region as well as paying a visit to the sickly Lord Bernard.

During the course of our meeting, I confirmed the extent of what was expected of me. Then, as I was trying to refocus myself on the task ahead, Lord Alexei let out a quiet sigh.

"You're rather thick when it comes to what rumors are circulating and when people have ulterior motives. I'm sure Therese hasn't mentioned this to you either, so I suppose I'll inform you myself," he said, prefacing what would be his explanation of his failed engagement. "Ralshen Region has been abandoned not once but twice in our history by the royal family. I assume you know what I'm speaking of?"

A bit perplexed as to why he was bringing that up, I gave a

hesitant nod.

The first incident he was referring to stemmed from when Ryzanity proliferated within the old empire's borders. As other religions dispersed along the continent's main highway and pushed Ryzanity back, an extremist denomination sensed their religion being threatened. They had established themselves in Norn where Ryzanity was the state religion, and due to their close proximity, Ralshen was swallowed up in this as well. There were many within the region who, through the influence of neighboring countries, became believers of Ryzanity.

The extremists identified the highway coming out of Sauslind as the "root of all evil" and demanded it be sealed off. Ralshen's regional lord was the first to step forward, followed by the other nobles, and said he'd comply with their demands. However, Sauslind couldn't possibly entertain such a one-sided request. After all, the royal family had defied the Hero King. Monotheistic beliefs were also prominent here, and the people enjoyed the religious freedom that provided. The royal family was thus concerned that Ralshen might be in danger of starting a rebellion. Even as the extremists provoked violence there, the capital left the region to fend for itself and it became a wasteland.

The next incident happened forty years ago. Norn was in its prime, and with backing from some of the empire's territories, they began invading us from the east in what was a Continental Highway War. The highway on Ars Continent used to be split into two. There was the northern highway which ran through the former Kai Arg Empire's territories, and there was the southern highway which ran through Sauslind. However, by the time the war started, the northern route had long since faded into obscurity due to the conflict in the old empire's territories, and Sauslind's southern highway was the prime method of travel and trade now. A faction of the fallen Kai Arg Empire had sought to reclaim their former glory by having Norn invade us, which led to the aforementioned war.

It was later theorized that Maldura had fueled this, seeking to restore the northern highway because it led directly into their own country and had once been a source of economic power for them. It made sense; that faction from the fallen empire was locked in constant internal conflict. They couldn't have afforded to financially support another country on their own.

Some also suspected that Maldura was behind the incident eighty years ago with the Ryzanity faction occupying the Ralshen Region. It wasn't farfetched to believe that the regional lord had been enticed to cooperate with them, given that a resurgence of the northern highway would also benefit the Ralshen Region because it was closer to them than the southern highway. In the case of Maldura, the southern

highway never reached them; its western entrance was located in Kelk Harbor, leading out to the western countries and archipelagos.

When Sauslind was attacked from the east, they were forced into a defensive position. The highway led straight to the capital, and in order to protect it, they thought their only option was to block the encroaching army.

This was the answer I thought Lord Alexei wanted from me, at least.

I gazed into his icy blue eyes as I confirmed what I knew, though I wasn't sure how this history related to what he wanted to discuss with me.

"At the time," Lord Alexei said, "Bakula was leading our central troops. Through an outlandish scheme, he managed to break our enemy's ranks. He's the one who led Sauslind to victory. However, that victory was not without hidden sacrifices."

Not only did we have an army closing in from the east, there was also a detachment invading from the northeast. They were trying to pincer Sauslind's forces as we tried to counter the enemy's main line.

Lord Alexei nodded to himself as he said, "After the incident with Ryzanity in Ralshen, a member of the royal family was appointed as the regional lord. The one present at the time was Lord Bernard. He, of course, led his own forces in response to the invasion, but Sauslind's army did not come to their aid. Instead, they encircled the region so they could stop the enemy's main troops from merging with the detachments that were already inside our borders. As a result, the royal family once again abandoned the region to their fate."

Feeling mournful, I cast my eyes down at my lap.

The person leading our armies at the time had been a man of great power within the military. He'd turned his eyes away from the casualties that resulted in the Ralshen Region. Back then, the Black Wing Knights had yet to be established. Having no official army in the region was part of what resulted in so many losses as well.

If Sauslind had sent their troops to reinforce the Ralshen Region, the enemy might have broken through their ranks and invaded the capital. They'd weighed that possibility and chosen instead to sacrifice the Ralshen Region.

After learning that their main forces had been repelled, the enemy deployment within the region sounded the retreat, but they left a number of casualties in their wake. The memorial service I was set to attend was something that had been performed yearly since. Grandpa Teddy had attended each one, so escorting me there wasn't particularly out of his way.

When Prince Christopher mentioned that the people of the region might not treat me well because of my connection to the royal family,

this was what he'd meant. Still, I had to wonder if the place had some kind of deep connection for Lord Alexei as well.

I peered over at him.

He had an annoyed look on his face as he sighed once more. "Ten years ago, the earl family Lord Bernard had married into came to me about a marriage proposal with the daughter of their house. As should be obvious from the historical context, he wanted to increase the royal family's influence in the region."

I remained silent, though I was both surprised and confused by this revelation.

I understood the political motivations at play here. The region was seen as a liability, but the royal family also felt apologetic over their past mistakes. In order to maintain a connection to the region and hold influence there, one option was a political marriage. Lord Alexei was no doubt their best option for this. Presently, he was only third in line for the throne.

However, what bothered me was how he spoke so dispassionately, as if the matter didn't concern him. Granted, ten years had passed since then, but I couldn't shake the unease I felt.

"I never heard about this in high society," I said. Then, unable to quell my curiosity, I asked, "Um...how did your engagement turn out?"

"She died," he said matter-of-factly.

"Pardon...?"

"Lady Lindsey Ralshen was her name. At the time, we were both fifteen. Engagement talk was proceeding smoothly, and we were going to publicly announce it. Before we could, an unforeseen incident resulted in her premature death. My engagement was dropped and never made official. However, there's a distinct chance the topic will come up when we go there. Please keep in mind what I've told you."

My confusion only mounted as I sat there, speechless.

"Any other questions?" he asked.

The words left my mouth before I could think them over. "What did you think about the engagement, Lord Alexei?"

"What?"

"She was to become your life partner, correct? Were you...accepting of the arrangement?"

For the briefest moment he scoffed, a cold smile on his face. It disappeared almost as quickly and he regarded me with a chilly expression.

"It was a political marriage between nobility. What emotion do women expect a man like me to show? Should I be plagued with memories of her tragic passing even though there was no love in our union? Women often dream about being the only one capable of

saving a man in that position, don't they? It's a common trope in stories and dramas." His voice was frigid as he spoke, and it was clear I'd treaded where I wasn't welcome.

Lord Alexei had most likely been caught up in such rumors during the time of his fiancée's passing, and other women had approached him out of sympathy and curiosity, aiming to snag the now open spot at his side.

Having stepped into forbidden territory, I felt awkward and apologized to him for the insensitive question.

"I don't mind," he said flatly. "I know women are all alike. They have a predisposition for becoming obsessed with stories, which blinds them to reality. Weren't you scolded for something similar recently?"

"Well, I... Yes, I suppose so." Although his words were accurate, I felt compelled to protest them. "But, um, not all women are like that." The words felt familiar. I was pretty sure I had said them before.

As I lost myself in thought, he sighed for the umpteenth time. "Certainly, there are women out there who are not like that. I have seen them myself. However, at the moment, I have no need for a partner. Do you mind if we drop the subject of my engagement now?"

"Oh...certainly, that's fine." Unable to argue with him, I simply nodded.

With that, our meeting about the Ralshen Region ended, and Lord Alexei continued talking in his usual monotone voice as he shuffled through other paperwork.

"At the beginning of this summer, you started a policy to allow female doctors," Lord Alexei said, as if he were planning to lead into a new topic. He was cut off by the sound of a voice booming through the room as someone struggled past the chamberlain and other assistants outside of Lord Alexei's office.

"Lady Elianna! Can a pregnant woman safely consume a laxative while pregnant?!"

Excuse me?

"No, that's not it," the man continued. He was flustered as he put his hand to his head. Normally the man's hair was perfectly combed back, but it looked disheveled now. He was far from the composed noble I knew. "Her bowels are loose, so I need the opposite medicine. Is there something that can... 'tighten' her bowels?" he asked, unsure. "I don't know how best to phrase it, but at any rate, I need something to relieve Therese's stomach pain! I read that book you lent me, *A Mother's First Time Giving Birth*, cover to cover. You're well versed on those types of books, so that must mean you and the prince...no! I'll keep that suspicion to myself. At any rate, this is a dire emergency and I need some way to help her!"

Seeing Earl Ardolino at his wits' end left me staring wide-eyed in

surprise. From the edge of my vision, I could see Lord Alexei scrunch his handsome face as if he were dealing with another migraine. His assistants seemed to sense what was coming because they fled immediately.

“Brother-in-law...” He wore a chilly smile as he stood and began conversing with Lady Therese’s husband.

Doubt and suspicion arose in me as I watched him. He was already treating the situation with irritation and exasperation, but when he’d spoken about his engagement before, he had seemed strangely detached. I figured that was largely because he was trying to relay the information objectively. Nonetheless, it seemed like to me he’d merely done a perfect job of hiding how he really felt about his late fiancée.

Even if he couldn’t talk to me about it, there was still something that struck me as odd about Lord Alexei’s engagement.

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We were two more days from our destination, and it was lunch time. We’d stopped at a small inn town along the highway to have our meal. I was currently caught up in conversation with the establishment’s proprietress.

“According to author Dan Edold’s *Following Sean’s Footsteps*,” I began, “the literary master, Sean Markeld, stayed at this very inn. That must mean he ate the same food we enjoyed moments ago.” I was so moved by the thought that my body trembled.

The slender and upbeat proprietress casually replied, “That’s right. Master Sean’s favorite was our specialty—a fluffy egg dish. Having eaten it yourself, I’m sure you can understand. You haven’t had anything like it anywhere else, have you?”

I quickly shook my head.

She grinned and puffed up her chest. “It’s a Ralshen local specialty, but ours is a step above the rest. Master Sean took a liking to it and stayed here for a long time. Unfortunately, the regional lord summoned Master Sean after catching wind about him.” As she murmured this, her face fell in disappointment.

The man in question was a famous literary master who was native to Sauslind. He’d passed away during the Ashen Nightmare sixteen years ago, but he’d left behind many philosophical stories about life and death. A distant, scholarly city had lauded his efforts, and his popularity had boomed domestically as well. His work was also beloved by commoners, given that he was of humble birth himself.

Confused by the conflicted look on the proprietress’s face, I tilted my head. She forced herself to smile back at me. “Master Sean hated formality above all else. He turned down plenty of invitations from

nobility. But the regional lord had a famous lake at his mansion, so Master Sean's curiosity got the best of him and he accepted the invitation. If you follow his path, you might find his footsteps lead other places as well."

"Truly?" Although my heart was leaden with anxiety about my impending duties, hearing that made my pulse jump.

When she nodded, I tried to question her further, but Lord Alexei and Grandpa Teddy interrupted us. They had gone to check the snow's depth on the road and had now come back to announce our departure. It was with great reluctance I peeled myself away, thanking the woman for her time.

"Come and eat here again," she called behind us as we left.

My interest remained piqued, and author Sean Markeld's writings were all I could think about as I slid into the carriage. It took me a while to even notice that the only people inside were Duchess Rosalia and myself. Lilia and the other maids were nowhere to be seen. Panicked, I quickly straightened myself, which only prompted Duchess Rosalia to chuckle.

"Lady Elianna, you truly are oblivious when it comes to anything outside of books."

"My apologies." I hung my head. I was supposed to be in the middle of an official visit, and I'd let my hobbies get the best of me.

She smiled, amused. "Thanks to you bringing all of that up, the proprietress's attitude toward us softened. She'd been wary of us up until that point, since she knew we'd been sent here on behalf of the royal family."

"Oh," I blurted, feeling a bit awkward. Since we entered the region, I had noticed people giving us looks as chilly as the mounting snow. Our carriages did carry the crest of the royal family, after all. That should have been enough to remind me to keep my guard up, but alas... "I'll be more careful from now on."

Even though it had worked out for me this time, there was no guarantee it would the next. I needed to be more prudent. At least, that was what I told myself.

The duchess giggled. "You're fine the way you are."

Startled, I glanced up at her. Her eyes were like a frozen lake in winter, subtle and subdued, as if other worries were preoccupying her right now.

"I think I understand now why Chris loves you," she said. "You're not weighed down by preconceptions and mistrust. In fact, you're the type to break through other people's walls, though you wouldn't seem it from the outside."

I stared blankly back at her, and the duchess's smile stretched wider.

“You must not have heard what the proprietress was mumbling to herself. ‘The prince’s betrothed is an odd one. But...maybe our kingdom is in good hands with her.’ That author was of humble origin, and yet you were genuinely enthusiastic about following the path he’d taken. Anyone who saw such unbridled passion would be taken aback.”

Now I felt even more ashamed.

As I averted my eyes, the duchess continued, “I would like to talk to you a bit about the past, Lady Elianna.”

“What?” I jumped a little, caught off guard by the sudden change of topic and how serious her expression had turned.

During the course of our trip, she had taught me much about the proper frame of mind for royalty and how to cope with various situations, using her lived experience as an example. Although at times, she had gone off on some tangents as well. Whatever this was had to be serious for her to shoo everyone else off so she could speak with me alone. My back went rigid as I sat there, anticipating what was to come.

The duchess sensed how nervous I was and smiled at me, but that didn’t stop her from getting straight to the point.

“Theodore is an illegitimate child.”

Chapter 7: The Royal Family's Secret

The palace was less vibrant in Eli's absence. Lack of sunlight left it suffocatingly dour. Normally, there was an air of excitement here as people anticipated the warmth and fragrance of spring, but instead an oppressive atmosphere had settled over us.

There wasn't any enthusiasm to be found around me. In fact, the air only grew more frigid and unforgiving.

"I received a report about the shipping delays from the western countries and the archipelagos. The number of cases are within acceptable limits for the average year. There's no reason to cherry pick this incident and cause a stir, as far as I'm concerned," I said.

Earl Brandt had marched into my office directly to launch his complaints. I had merely smiled at him as he haughtily relayed the numbers to me, as if he genuinely thought I hadn't read the official reports myself.

The visit from Maldura's delegation had driven the bay's operation to a standstill. Maritime merchants were watching with bated breath to see how things would turn out. This had impeded some of the deals we had with western merchants, among other things. As the earl emphasized the significance of the western entrance, he made distasteful allusions to the important figure supporting him as he tried to pressure me to acquiesce to his demands. It was almost as if he thought it only natural for me to relent.

I humored him by listening and responded with a smile. "I'll bear your input in mind."

He frowned, clearly dissatisfied, and opened his mouth to try to add more, but he then paused to smile. "Well, I suppose you are still young, Your Highness. You must want to follow your dreams while you can, but I'm sure in time, you will see what's necessary." He spoke those cryptic words before withdrawing, but the way he hastily sped out of the room spoke volumes about his personal feelings.

I glanced after him before dropping my gaze back to the documents in front of me. Normally, I never had to deal with men like him because Alexei would dispense with them as soon as he had a report in his hands, so they rarely made it all the way to me.

I sighed, finding this more troublesome and inconvenient than I'd imagined. If it meant sacrificing some comfort for myself to strengthen

Eli's security, then it was a small price to pay. At least, I was trying to convince myself as much when a carefree voice ruined the moment.

"Wow, I haven't seen anything like that in a while. Well, I saw it a bit when I first started serving you, though. Alex's influence must have had quite the impact," my ginger-haired bodyguard mumbled to himself with a quiet sigh.

Glen was right; Alex was the heir to one of Sauslind's most prominent duchies, and he was equally cold to everyone regardless of their status or wealth. Part of the reason I hadn't faced this for a long while was because he was skilled at driving away refuse that would otherwise crowd around my office.

However, he wasn't the only one. Glen's father was the general of the imperial guard and the earl of a prominent house. That power helped intimidate and drive people away as well. Not that Glen seemed to realize it.

There was one other person in the room, whose voice was both cheerful and melodious as he spoke.

"Chris, you really are a prince. When I met you years ago, you looked like nothing more than a selfish, self-important, spoiled rich boy."

"I didn't know Chris back then," said Glen. "I was training in the lowest ranks of the military at the time. Though to be honest, he's always been self-important."

"Huh? He's always been like that, then? I've got some serious sympathy for the people who've been by his side all this time. In fact, it's kind of a miracle he managed to snag Lady Elianna like that. Wait, let me guess, she doesn't know about this side of him, does she?"

"Oh, I'm sure she doesn't, but she's kind of an airhead herself." Glen shrugged. "Still, she's the one with the reins in the relationship, so it's entertaining enough to watch the two of them."

I slowly looked up, and the moment Glen caught my gaze, he clamped his mouth shut. I smirked to myself. A government official was standing nearby. He was here subbing in for Alexei. I handed some documents off to him and gave him some orders as I did so. Given that this man was one of Alexei's subordinates, it was no wonder he was so skilled at reading the air in the room. He responded in as few words as he could before excusing himself.

"Ian," I said as I took the next stack of documents from my chamberlain. "Stop waiting around here for my order and finish your business. If you have returned to the palace as a member of the Black Wing Knights, then promptly report whatever news you bear."

Currently, General Bakula had split the most elite of his order into two groups. One (led by the general himself) was accompanying my fiancée, Elianna. The other had left earlier this week to welcome

Maldura's delegation and guard them as they made their way to the capital. The man in front of me was supposed to be a member of the latter group, but he'd returned three days later without any warning. Given that he'd removed the typical black garb that the Black Wing Knights were famous for, he looked like just another soldier and so no one took any notice of him.

I had a feeling I knew what this was about.

Ian was currently standing in the corner of the room. His brightly colored hair swayed as he moved. He chuckled as he replied, "Can't help it. When I came to report, I saw someone was already here, haughtily wielding someone else's status to try to get their way. With nothing else to do, I decided to watch how it played out. And I realized, yep. You really are a prince, Chris."

And what in the world did you think I was?

I scowled at him, feeling a bit irate with his remark.

He only laughed as he strolled up to me, giving a military salute. "I confirmed the entry of Maldura's delegation. They have eighteen members. Among them, twelve are bodyguards, two are maids, one is a chamberlain, and three are nobles."

"So exactly as they informed us, and they're taking the same course they said they would." I nodded. "And? They didn't share the names of the nobles. Did you find out who was with them?"

Ian's tone was rigid and formal as he relayed the one name I didn't want to hear. Disgust welled up from my gut, and my throat vibrated with a strangled sound that even I couldn't distinguish—was I laughing? Or grunting in dismay?

"That loathsome foreigner."

"Hm?" Ian was back to his regular upbeat self as he glanced at my face. "Now you sound more like the Chris I remember from the past."

Fortunately, the chamberlain entered right then to report the time. I discarded my broken quill pen, having snapped it moments ago in anger, and handed the sheaf of documents over to Ian. He was going to need to share his report once more during our meeting. I lifted myself out of my chair to start heading that way when Glen hurried over toward me.

He hesitated before saying, "H-Hey, Chris, it's kinda scary when you don't say anything."

I flashed a smile at him. "Glen," I said, pity in my eyes. "I realize you're feeling bereft without Alex coldly glaring at you all the time, but I'll have to firmly decline if you're requesting I take his place. If that's where your interest lies, I hear there's shops in the Luna red light district that cater to that sort of thing. Though I would ask you not to bring whips and high heels into the palace. If Eli were to see, I'd have no choice but to advise her to take pity on you and offer you

a candle as a gift.”

“Oh,” Ian said with surprise as he glanced over at Glen. “I didn’t realize the imperial guard here at the palace had people with those sorts of fetishes.”

“That’s absolutely untrue!” Glen screeched at the top of his lungs, voice reverberating. “Chris, stop fueling misunderstandings about me constantly!”

“I hear Earl Kila’s wife hosts a party for people with those proclivities. You’ve been close with her for a while now, haven’t you?” I shot him a knowing look.

“Oh, gods...” Ian edged away from Glen.

“You’re misunderstanding things!” Panicked, Glen raised his voice again. “She only used me to help attract the man she was actually interested in. And now people have mistaken me for being one of her buddies. All the other married women I was close to got the wrong impression, and younger noble ladies started looking at me as if I were some exotic animal on display. I’m a full-fledged victim here!”

His sorrowful appeal was deafening, so I decided it was time to land the finishing blow. I gave him a merciful, saintly smile as I said, “Glen, I know your relationship with women is going up in flames, but you needn’t announce it for the whole world.”

Glen staggered, tears welling up in his eyes as he mumbled to himself. “My luck with women... My star alignment... Maybe I should participate in Orphen’s research society and get a divine revelation from the heavens. Or perhaps I should declare myself Doctor Harvey’s apprentice.” His voice sounded almost hollow.

Even Ian seemed to feel sorry for the man and offered him some words of consolation. The two of them had become acquainted since the Black Wing Knights’ arrival and found it easy to chat with one another. Still, they hadn’t known each other for very long, which was likely why Ian’s next words hit like a blow to the gut.

“Glen, I really do think it’s dishonest to be involved with so many women. You should select one you want to be with and focus on her.” Ian went on lecturing Glen until the conversation eventually devolved into him bragging about his own girlfriend. “Incidentally, I’ve only ever had an eye for one woman. I suppose in that sense, Chris and I are alike. I’m childhood friends with my sweetheart, and she’s adorable. I don’t remember when it was exactly, but she visited my unit one time to bring me stuff and all the guys were so jealous...” He kept going on and on, boasting about his love life, only making Glen’s head spin even more.

That’s right. Ian has a younger lover as well, I remembered, recalling the distant yet vivid past, back before the flowers of youth had bloomed for me. At the time, I still held my memories of Eli near

despite lacking the power to override her father or to steal her away by force. The only thing I could do was grit my teeth, vexed by how impotent I was. I was just so desperate then. It was around that time I met Ian, as well as my direct subordinate, Alan Ferrera. Back then, even I realized I needed to mature more before I could do anything.

Honestly, it was such an embarrassing period of my life. I was still wet behind the ears, and yet I constantly tried to brandish justice like it was a weapon. If I could white out those memories, I would. Likewise, I didn't want to share anything about them with Eli, but she seemed to be interested in knowing more.

I was happy she felt that way. Eli was only ever interested in books or things that happened to personally intrigue her. Everything else might as well not exist as far as she was concerned. It was humbling to know she was invested in my past. If I didn't feel joy over that, what other happiness was there in life? Nonetheless, I still didn't want to talk about my younger self.

As I contemplated how I might weasel my way out of revealing anything from my shameful past, I recalled the moment we'd shared together a few days ago, before she left the capital.

It was a sunny, winter morning.

"I'll be off then, Your Highness." Her expression was unusually clear as she made that declaration, and I found my hand unconsciously reaching toward her.

I got the feeling if I let her go now, she would never come back. Dread and unease clawed at me. Ignoring the eyes watching us, I pulled her into my embrace and gazed down at those ashen gray eyes so I could remind myself of the promise we'd made to each other.

"You remember what I said, right, Eli?"

It was adorable the way her cheeks flushed as she hesitantly nodded. In an instant, regret flooded my heart, threatening to swallow me whole. Why had I made the decision to send her so far away? This might be my last opportunity to make excuses and keep her here. I could lock her in my arms and keep her deep within the palace—where she would be safe, where no one could touch her.

For an instant, that thought did cross my mind, but it was extinguished by the glimmering light in her eyes.

"Your Highness, I'm trusting the Maldura matter to you." The warmth in her gaze made it clear how much she trusted me.

I hesitated, and second doubts cropped up over and over. Was this really the best course of action? Was there really no other way? Wasn't there some other option here?

After struggling inwardly, I finally arrived at a conclusion: I didn't want to keep Elianna locked away in the world of books. I had told

myself if a time ever came when she stepped out and faced me, I would support her. That was already something I'd sworn to myself. It was too late to take it back now. We had to take this path so we could have a future together come spring.

It had taken a long time to arrive at said conclusion; I had spent numerous nights piecing together plans and stayed up until dawn going over them again and again. I hadn't made up my mind until the very last second, and now I had to remind myself of that determination.

Think back, remember the ashen gray eyes of the girl you had locked in your arms. Trust Elianna.

That was where my thoughts at last settled—on my fiancée, who was traveling farther and farther away from me this very moment. A few days ago, it had been difficult to let her slip away. I remembered the embarrassment she showed as I held her warm body close to mine. And I also recalled the boorish old man who'd intervened in our romantic moment. I had my own qualms with him. Fortunately, whatever he tried to pull, I'd already taken measures to counter it.

There's only one problem, I thought to myself.

Right then, Alex's subordinate hurried over to me and handed me a couple of documents.

I scanned the pages. The moment my eyes caught some disturbing information contained within, the malice I usually kept hidden away inside me spilled out.

Glen was sensitive enough he reacted to it instantly.

Tensions were high in the palace as we waited in anticipation of the foreign delegation's arrival. I couldn't be seen in public wearing a grave expression, lest I fuel people's anxiety. Thus, I kept a smile on my face even as my thoughts moved at a dizzying speed. I tried to tamp down the panic gripping my heart.

I'd looked at this matter from various angles, and there was no mistaking it.

My hands clenched, and my lips grew taut, strained from trying to maintain the lighthearted expression on my face. Glen was perceptive enough, or rather, had enough survival instincts to suss out what that meant. Both of us fell silent. It was difficult to suppress the hostility I felt.

The trend in this information pointed to one thing: someone very close to Elianna and me was a traitor.



The air in the carriage had frozen over with silence, but after a few awkward moments, the stifling atmosphere passed.

I stared back at the duchess. As much as I wanted to doubt my ears, the grave expression in her icy blue eyes told me I'd heard her correctly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it by cracking a small smile and saying, "I knew I'd surprise you if I said that." Her tone was airy and light, but the lingering tension made it hard to believe she'd only been joking.

My mouth snapped shut.

She let out a quiet sigh and hesitated for a moment, eyes darting back and forth. As the carriage vibrated beneath us, she readjusted herself in the seat and hardened her resolve.

"I'm sure this conversation must be unpleasant for you, given how close you and Chris are to Theodore. However, this is one of the royal family's secrets. You will be part of us come spring, so you need to be aware of these things. Moreover..." She paused, drawing her brows before continuing. "This particular matter concerns our destination, as well. His Majesty and Queen Henrietta both approved of me sharing this with you. Lady Elianna, I assume you know of my mother?"

"Yes..."

In other words, the late Queen Amalia. She was born into an earl house within the kingdom and met the late king at a garden party. The two fell in love at first sight and marriage talks began. Queen Amalia and her husband were later blessed with three children: Duchess Rosalia, King William, and Prince Theodore.

Most people knew them as an intimate, loving couple, but if the whispers circulating high society were anything to go by, they'd grown estranged in their later years. It wasn't baseless rumor, either; a few years prior to her death, Queen Amalia moved away from the capital and lived by herself. The king also led a secluded life after passing the crown to his son. He moved to a royal villa near the palace where he passed the rest of his days with a different female companion.

Everyone always spoke about how wise Queen Amalia was. During her husband's rule, the couple overcame two enormous wars. She also made prodigious contributions in the aftermath, helping to financially compensate victims and support restoration efforts. It was difficult to think such a person could commit adultery—I certainly didn't believe it.

My skepticism must have shown clear as day on my face.

Duchess Rosalia dropped her gaze, looking forlorn as she said, “My mother—Queen Amalia—was a secret Ryzanian.”

I swallowed hard. “The Queen was?”

“Yes. Well, originally it was her mother who was a believer, and that had a huge influence on my mother. Legally, Sauslind recognizes freedom of religion within its borders. The Ralshen Region is a good example of that. But that doesn’t mean it’s acceptable for royalty to believe in whatever they wish. My mother’s faith came to light forty years ago during the Continental Highway War.”

When the war happened, Queen Amalia advocated strongly for diplomacy with Norn. Norn was using the persecution of Ryzanians as pretext for their hostilities. Thus, she argued, if Sauslind were to publicly recognize the religion, it would work in their favor during negotiations. The previous king ignored her advice and approved of a battle plan that would abandon the people of Ralshen, most of whom were Ryzanian themselves. This was the catalyst that created the chasm between them.

“My mother was deeply affected by the casualties in Ralshen. She devoted herself to financing and supporting reparations. The gap between her and my father only widened in the meantime. Then, she discovered she was pregnant and later gave birth to Theodore.”

“But still, that doesn’t mean...”

There being distance between the two of them isn’t enough evidence to claim Prince Theodore was born of adultery. I couldn’t shake my disbelief.

The duchess’s eyes went icy cold with conviction. “Seventeen years ago, my father fell ill. When Will—the current king—succeeded the throne, there was an unsuccessful attempt on his life. The culprit was a researcher from the Pharmacy Lab. They wanted to prove the existence of a cure-all medicine. They tried to poison the king so they could gain fame by curing him, using an antidote they’d developed themselves.”

I sucked in a breath and froze. I’d already heard a little bit about the incident shortly before I left the palace. It was a taboo and a scandal for the Pharmacy Lab. Silently, I stared back at the duchess.

A derisive smile ghosted her lips, one that reminded me of her son. “When Will was crowned, a noble approached the royal family about an engagement between his daughter and the young Theodore. At the time, their family had as much power as the royal family, and they stood in stark opposition to us politically. I’m referring to Duke Slade of the Eidel Domain.”

She spoke dispassionately, sharing only the facts without letting her emotion filter through. That had the opposite effect, however; it made her true feelings all the more apparent.

“Duke Slade,” she continued, “committed treason and talks of Theodore’s engagement to his daughter were dropped. Yet even after Will took the throne and Queen Henrietta gave birth to Chris, the faction backing Theodore refused to disappear. That was all because of my mother’s favoritism. Queen Amalia had built that faction for him.”

“That can’t be!” I gasped. Saying that was tantamount to saying Queen Amalia was the true culprit behind the attempted assassination on King William—her own son.

In the face of my outburst, the duchess only flashed a smile. The blue of her eyes was like a frozen lake in winter, quiet and desolate. “I speak only the truth,” she said. “Will and I were closer to our father, so she favored Theodore and shunned the two of us. She opposed Will’s ascension, and she was chief among the supporters backing Theodore to succeed in his place. The assassination attempt on Will happened around that same time.”

No matter what time period, a king’s ascension was inevitably surrounded by controversy and scandal. History had taught me that much. Still, I could only imagine the mental anguish Duchess Rosalia and King William must have faced, suspecting their mother of such a betrayal. My heart ached for them.

“I know that none of this is Theodore’s fault,” the duchess continued. “He’s merely a victim my mother drew along in her schemes. But I can’t lie and say I don’t sometimes think, ‘If only he’d never been born.’”

I bit my lip. There was nothing I could say to that.

“*People change.*” Prince Christopher had told me that before. At some point, Queen Amalia took the wrong path and chose betrayal. There was a reason people revered her for her intelligence. Before she lost her way and favored Theodore, she had once loved Duchess Rosalia and King William equally. They had also respected her and adored her as well, I was sure.

Duchess Rosalia took a deep breath before she went on. “Honestly, the only people who really know whether Theodore is illegitimate or not are my mother and father. But the fact remains that their relationship soured completely in the few years preceding his birth. There were doubts about his parentage when he was born.”

I kept silent and stared steadily back at her. My mind was grappling with all the information she’d given me, and then I recalled her saying how this related to our destination. I blanched as the puzzle pieces came together. The late Queen Amalia had gone to great lengths in compensating the Ralshen for its losses. The person ruling over the region at that time had tried to protect the Ryzanians living there, which meant...

I swallowed hard and searched the duchess's gaze. Her eyes were like the arctic, frozen and unwavering.

"Theodore refuses to visit this land. That tells me all I need to know," she said. That was her answer to my suspicions.

My hands had been resting in my lap, but unconsciously I hunched forward and squeezed my knees. I felt positively miserable, but I couldn't clearly identify what was bothering me the most.

Prince Theodore was not proactive politically. He had an amicable relationship with Duchess Rosalia. I'd seen firsthand that he was on good terms with King William, as well.

I struggled to swallow back the emotions welling up within me. I was an outsider; I had no business commenting on the ties between siblings. Still, I found myself longing desperately to see Prince Christopher. I wanted to hear his usual scathing banter with Theodore again. Their witty quips had always exasperated me, but now they seemed endearing. Moments I had taken for granted now felt precious and irreplaceable.

As I tried desperately to quell my sentimentality, Duchess Rosalia gently called out my name. "Lady Elianna?"

I lifted my head. Her eyes were filled with concern.

"The reason His Majesty and I decided to talk to you about this was because we don't want you treading the same path. You have made many policy proposals since your engagement to Chris. Of course, most of those have succeeded, in no small part because Chris did the groundwork necessary for them to flourish." She giggled, but her smile soon slipped away. "If there ever comes a time when you and Chris don't agree—if there's ever a time when Chris staunchly opposes and disregards your opinion...will you be able to stay at his side despite that?"

That question was like a dagger to the heart.

Simply put, Duchess Rosalia was asking if I could continue to trust Prince Christopher even if we had a difference of opinion on a political matter. The previous king and Queen Amalia had faced a similar situation, and it had fractured their relationship. They had remained unable to repair it, and that was why there were suspicions linked to Prince Theodore's parentage.

"Because we don't want you treading the same path."

Hypothetically speaking, what *would* happen if Prince Christopher were to oppose me and step into a war? What if a time like that ever came? What if, as the crown prince, he had to make a decision like that? Could I firmly swear I would stay by his side despite that? Could I really continue to trust him? If the prince crossed a line I refused to budge on...what would I do?

My heart was shaken, and I could find no answer to give Duchess

Rosalia.

Chapter 8: At the Bottom of the Lake

Lilia was peeking out the carriage window, and the moment Earl Ralshen's manor came into view, she squealed.

"Look, Miss Eli! That's the Lady's Lake. It's just as large as the stories claimed. You can't even see the coast on the other side from here!"

Her excitement coaxed me into glancing outside as well. There was a thin mist hanging over the water.

"It is written in Ralshen's local history that the currents bring warm air down from the Urma Mines and the temperature difference often produces a haze over the lake's surface," I said. "Seeing it for myself, it seems they were right."

Although I was genuinely impressed, Lilia gave me an exasperated look. "Lady's Lake is so famous there's even paintings of it. Can you give me a little bit more of a—I don't know—sentimental reaction?"

"Oh, um..." I wracked my brain for something that would satisfy her. "Oh, I know! Qui Tash's art piece, *The Singing Lake*, depicts this very body of water. He drew dozens of water lilies in it, painting them as if they were all competing to see who could sing the loudest. It was quite popular in the art world." I was confident my answer would meet her expectations, but she only quirked a quizzical brow at me.

"Hold on a minute. If I remember right, that artwork depicted a girl in the shade of a tree and it looked like she'd collapsed there in tears. That then gave birth to the story of the *Mourning Lake* that was included in the book *Ten Bizarre Art Mysteries*, correct?"

"Correct." I smiled at her. "That became the basis for the crying girl in *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*."

"Miss Eli..." Her eyes had gone eerily cold.

Flustered, I tried to explain. "But, um, the original source for the crying girl is actually said to be the heron. Herons gather near water and their cry resembles that of a human. Also, water lilies open in the morning and close by sunset, so they aren't a type of flower that houses the emotions of the dead."

Her gaze had turned frigid by now, and I was starting to panic, which turned into me rambling.

"Among Sean Markeld's writings was a book entitled, *Conversations from the Grave: Ghosts in Folktales*. The number of ghost stories we have signifies the amount of guilt and self-condemnation

people experience when other people die. In other words, it's connected to various peoples' ways of life and—"

"Excuse. Me. Miss. Eli," Lilia said, sharply punctuating each word.

The way she was staring me down caused the words to hang unspoken in my throat.

She gave a breathy sigh, the lament in her voice making her sound mature beyond her years. "I understand well enough that your definition of sentimental is keenly linked to spirits. How in the world does a conversation about paintings wind up turning to ghosts? Now I can see all the grief His Highness and the others have had to endure."

As Lilia mumbled to herself, I got a glimpse at her true concerns. "I worry that while you're here, the lake's name will change from Lady's Lake to Spirit's Lake. After all, you did manage to add more depth to some of the stories from *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital* by reenacting their scenes in real life."

This was the first I'd heard of this. For what it was worth, the newest edition of the series was due to come out this summer, and I was anxiously anticipating its release.

Lilia's expression turned serious as she firmly cautioned me, "You had better not go anywhere close to the lake alone while you're here, okay? We don't need them coming up with new ghost stories about a spectral figure appearing out of the mists."

I couldn't shake the sense she'd said something offensive to me just now.

My cousin stroked her chin and mumbled, "Perhaps it would be faster for me to spread ghost stories about Layshen Lake before you have a chance to do it yourself."

Watching her try to devise ways to keep me out of trouble warmed my heart. In the wake of that conversation earlier with Duchess Rosalia, I had been in low spirits. Now it was only Lilia and I in the carriage, and she'd gone out of her way to speak to me normally, keeping the conversation upbeat. It was a drastic change, given how well she'd perfected acting humble and polite (as a maid should) in front of people.

Her concern was reassuring and prompted me to pull myself together. Rather than worry about the future, I needed to concentrate on my official duties in the present.

Lake Layshen was the official name for what people knew more familiarly as Lady's Lake. It was one of the most famous bodies of water in Sauslind, and it had earned its nickname from a famous painting of the same title—one that became an overnight sensation. It was created by a renowned painter over fifty years ago, and the scenery it depicted no longer existed.

The reason it was named Lady's Lake was because a fortress was reflected in the water's surface, surrounded by a colorful array of water lilies, creating the illusion of a noble woman. Prior to the painting's popularity, people had regarded the fortress as boorish and austere. Its likeness in the painting, however, had changed people's impressions and given it a more favorable reputation. Alas, the fortress was destroyed nearly forty years ago during the Continental Highway War. The current Earl Ralshen's manor now occupied the site where the fortress had once been.

When we arrived, the young Earl Ralshen came out to greet us.

"Welcome, Lady Elianna Bernstein."

The reason he greeted me first was because, as the crown prince's betrothed, I was the royal family's representative here. General Bakula, Duchess Strasser, and Lord Alexei were merely honored guests tagging along with me.

The earl and I exchanged pleasantries, and he invited us inside his estate. His full name was Earl Carl Ralshen, and like Lord Alexei, he was twenty-five years old. He had lost both of his parents in the Ashen Nightmare sixteen years prior. Afterward, he'd temporarily spent time in his grandfather's (Lord Bernard) care, but after coming of age, he took his place as the head of their family.

He was a rather difficult man to approach, given the permanent scowl etched onto his face. Incidentally, his twin sister was also Lord Alexei's late fiancée.

"I'm afraid it will be difficult for you to see Lord Bernard at the moment."

As I spoke to the earl and confirmed his grandfather's circumstances, an oppressive air hung over us. Lord Bernard, it would seem, was in even more ill health than we had been led to believe from their correspondences to the palace. Lord Alexei and Grandpa Teddy both wore grim looks on their faces, but that didn't stop one of the ladies of the earl's household from grinning at us and trying to lighten the air.

"In that case, perhaps we should gush among ourselves about some happier news. Lady Elianna's wedding with the crown prince is fast approaching. Perhaps if we liven things up a bit with some similar good news, Lord Bernard's health will take a turn for the better as well."

The woman in question, whose boisterous tone ill-fitted the grim atmosphere, was the earl's cousin. By appearances, she looked to be the same age. She was far more assertive than the earl's wife, who stood quietly at her husband's side.

Duchess Rosalia gave a cold smile. "I am most curious what you could be alluding to by saying 'similar good news'?"

“Why, of course, I am referring to Prince Christopher’s right-hand man, Lord Alexei. He previously tried to secure an engagement with our house. Why not consider making a second attempt?”

“You say ‘second attempt,’ but unfortunately, no young lady of an appropriate age is present for such an arrangement,” the duchess said, quirking a brow. “And as his mother, I could hardly approve of him having relations with a woman such as yourself who has already been through several divorces.”

The lady’s cheeks rapidly heated at that barb, but Duchess Rosalia merely maintained the same businesslike smile she often used when conversing with nobility.

“More importantly,” she continued, “we are here on official business. Not to lose ourselves in girlish fervor over finding a new partner.” The duchess’s reproachful tone was enough to drive off the awkwardly upbeat atmosphere.

Afterward, the earl’s cousin fell silent while the rest of us engaged in light conversation. Despite the mention of his engagement, Lord Alexei kept an emotionless mask on his face, giving the impression that his mind was more preoccupied with other matters.

Duchess Rosalia and myself were weary with fatigue after the journey and opted to retire to our rooms to relax. Before I could go, though, I caught the expression on Grandpa Teddy’s face changing out of the corner of my eye. I’d seen this same look on his face countless times during our journey here. I suspected he wanted to speak to me, so I paused to wait for him. Now that we had arrived, he would have some reprieve from his escort duties, and the two of us could talk leisurely. Unfortunately, I lost my opportunity; Lord Alexei intercepted him, claiming he wanted to consult Grandpa Teddy about the memorial service.

A house servant guided me to my room, and for a short while, I was able to relax. Maids who’d accompanied me from the palace were gracious enough to offer massages to relieve my fatigue. Lilia had disappeared in the interim and made her reappearance shortly thereafter, having already procured information from the staff here.

“That female cousin of the earl—her name is Isabelle Thomason,” she whispered conspiratorially. “As Duchess Rosalia mentioned, she’s been divorced twice. She’s in the middle of her third separation right now.”

“Lilia, you’re incorrigible.” I didn’t approve of her curiosity in matters that had nothing to do with us.

She stuck out her bottom lip, pouting. “What? She’s the one who acted all pompous. You’re the representative here on an official appointment from the crown, and yet as soon as basic greetings were done, she ignored you completely. The woman doesn’t even qualify as

a noble. How can she have the audacity to show such disregard to the crown prince's fiancée? All I did was poke around a little, and the other staff were quick to tell me she acts like she owns the place—like she's superior to the earl's wife!"

Perhaps the grim mood on the journey had affected Lilia as well. She was acting like a beached fish who'd finally found water again.

"Besides," said Lilia, "can you believe the nerve of her? She'll soon be a three-time divorcee and she's aiming for a duke's son? She thinks she can be Lord Alexei's wife? It would create outrage in the capital if other noble ladies were to hear. As part of Prince Christopher's inner circle, Lord Alexei has a large number of devotees."

"Well, I did know he was somewhat popular."

It was the first I'd ever heard of him having "devotees," but I did know that he was one of the most desirable and eligible bachelors in the kingdom. Unfortunately, as the epithet "Ice Scion" implied, he intimidated many of the young noble ladies.

"You simply don't get it, Miss Eli." Lilia shook her head, chagrined. "Lord Alexei appears cold on the surface, and he is, in fact, quite frigid when you get to know him as well. But that's also a sign that he won't yield to anyone, right? He shows the same aloof attitude to everyone no matter how great the power they wield, and that's exactly what a lot of men and women appreciate about him—because he's helped the little people by not being swayed. He may be a solitary ice demon, but he has a fanatic, albeit humble, following."

Lilia, I have no idea if you're complimenting him at this point or disparaging him.

"Thus," she continued, "we have to eliminate any woman of ill conduct who approaches him. I don't even want to imagine what his devotees might do to me otherwise when we return to the capital." Lilia shivered at the thought.

It struck me as a bit odd that people would react so intensely to this when they had been much more mellow in the face of rumors that His Highness might take a concubine in the past. Not long ago, when Lord Glen was in the midst of marriage talks himself, everyone had found the whole thing amusing. Yet when it came to Lord Alexei, people turned hostile and the woman in question had to be eliminated.

These thoughts helped distract me and ease the anxiety weighing me down, and yet at the same time, each passing day made my heart squeeze tighter and tighter, constricted by a range of emotions. The prince entrusting this duty to me had left me feeling empowered in the few days preceding our departure from the palace, but something was different now. Each time I saw these places I'd only previously read about in books, I couldn't help wishing the prince were by my

side.

Thoughts came one after the other. What would the prince think if he saw this? Would he enjoy this cuisine? What would his impression of this handicraft be? If only the two of us could gaze together at the lake depicted in that famous painting...

It gave me the strange impression that he was actually here beside me, experiencing all of this with me, even though I knew that wasn't true. Consequently, the lonely reality of his absence came creeping in on me during random moments throughout the day, unbidden. I put a metaphorical lid on those emotions and pushed them down as best I could.

Once my duties here were over, I could return to His Highness's side with my head held high. I wanted to have memories and stories to share with him when that time came, so I decided to invite Lilia out on a stroll.

For her part, my cousin was still mumbling to herself. "What methods can be used to eliminate refuse like her? Option one: ignore her... No, that won't work; she'll only get an even bigger head on her shoulders. Option two: put her in her place through thorough criticism of her behavior... Hm, but she doesn't seem too concerned with her lower status, given that arrogant attitude. Option three, the surefire technique: tell her that her mother's as ugly as a monkey's behind. Jean said this was effective against the imperial guard, but I wonder..."

I will definitely need to scold Jean later.

One of the maids opened the door for me, and as I was about to step out, I froze. On the other side was the young Countess Ralshen, loitering in front of a number of my perplexed guards.

"Oh," Lilia blurted, coming to her senses.

The earl's wife gave us a troubled smile, and an awkward silence hung in the air.

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"So Mister Sean spent his time here studying art rather than writing?"

The other woman answered my query with a subtle smile. "Yes. The family head at the time had a great interest in the arts and was proactive about helping those with promise show their skills to the world. I've heard that, at one point, our manor was filled with young, artistic prodigies. Mister Sean Markeld took inspiration from those youths and learned the basics of painting himself."

"How fascinating." I was so impressed by her story that my body trembled.

The whole reason I had invited Lilia out for a stroll was to search

for traces of Mister Sean Markeld. Countess Ralshen had kindly volunteered to show us around when we bumped into her outside of my room, and the tension in the air had mostly faded. Presently, I was gazing at a number of anonymous paintings lined up in one of the corridors.

One of Mister Sean's works may be among them. Or perhaps some famous artist's work is hidden among these.

My heart was pounding with an excitement I usually only experienced when visiting a library.

Lilia stood behind me, mumbling, "If Mister Alfred saw this, I have no doubt he'd start appraising each one."

Admittedly, my brother's fondness for art was second to none. He had a talent for pointing out hidden treasures, even ones unsigned by their creator. In that regard, Alfred resembled our uncle, though the latter's interest lay in searching ancient ruins rather than hunting down treasures.

"Yes, I can see the former earl really adored art," I said.

Although it was normal for nobles to adorn their houses with paintings from famous artists, this manor was rare because the pieces here were all done anonymously. If the sheer number in this corridor were any indication, the earl truly had adored creativity.

"Indeed." The young countess gave me a hesitant smile. "The well-known piece *Lady's Lake* was what made our land so famous. Consequently, the former earl felt compelled to become a patron for the arts, and he successfully sponsored many talented people. Unfortunately, the Ashen Nightmare broke out and he, along with the artists and Mister Sean, took ill. Ralshen became known as a land of death where the population rapidly dwindled."

I fell silent, my heart panging with the mention of that plague.

The Ashen Nightmare was said to have spread to Ralshen from the neighboring Azul Region, but medical researchers suspected the sickness had actually originated in the fallen empire's former territory. According to them, it had festered in the north and then traveled over the northern mountain range via air currents and expanded its reign of terror across Ralshen and Azul. Countless rivers flowed through the Azul Region, and trade by boat had proliferated there. This, many claimed, was what had caused the plague to infest all corners of our kingdom. But Azul was not alone in its suffering; Ralshen also suffered an enormous number of casualties.

The earl's manor rested at the center of Ralshen, whose geography consisted of difficult terrain peppered with numerous mines. The difficulty of logistics here was why Sauslind had assumed enemies wouldn't invade from this part of the border. That miscalculation cost us dearly in the Continental Highway War.

I kept my lips pursed.

A lack of information on the plague as well as doctors to effectively treat it had had catastrophic consequences on Ralshen, which were further exacerbated by human bias and erroneous speculation. It was for that very reason that my father, Marquess Bernstein, had made such a concerted effort to finance the maintenance of the kingdom's highways.

I let out a soft sigh, gazing at the paintings in front of me. Many of them depicted scenery and flowers—namely, water lilies—but I also discovered a portrait.

“Is this...the former earl?”

The man in question resembled Earl Carl Ralshen, whom I'd met a bit earlier, though this man was far older. He was drawn beside a woman with a gentle smile on her face.

“That's right,” the countess answered with a nod. She gazed warmly up at the painting in question. “I only married into this family two years ago, so unfortunately, I didn't know the late earl personally. It's only thanks to this portrait that I'm able to see what he looked like.”

“I see...” Thinking of the deceased made me reflect fondly on my own mother, whose face I now saw only in my memories.

The earl's family was preserved in a number of family portraits, and it was evident through these how they had once been.

Lilia was gazing up at them as well when she paused and asked, “Um, is that young girl there Lady Lindsey Ralshen, perhaps?” Her voice sounded hesitant, as if she knew she was bringing up a sensitive topic.

She must have heard about Alexei's late fiancée during the course of the trip.

When the countess nodded, Lilia glanced away, her lips pinched tight.

Countess Ralshen forced a smile at her. “You must be thinking she looks like Lady Isabelle, yes? From what I've heard, the two so resembled each other in childhood that people mistook her and Lady Isabelle for twins.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. And now that his sister has passed away, my husband has a habit of overlooking Lady Isabelle's behavior because of their resemblance.” She hesitated, glancing at me. “Um, on that note... Lady Elianna, I'd like to apologize to you on behalf of this house for any offense she may have caused.”

I stared back at her. As I suspected, she had overheard our conversation in the room. It must have been weighing on her this whole time. Part of the issue lay with me; I lacked the commanding

aura one should possess as the betrothed of a crown prince.

Nonetheless, I accepted her gesture and returned it with a question of my own. "I heard that Lady Isabelle is a cousin from the earl's mother's side?" I had heard she wasn't of the Ralshen line but had basically been raised up alongside Earl Ralshen and Lady Lindsey.

The countess hesitated at first but eventually answered my question. According to her, Lady Isabelle was the daughter of the late countess's younger sister, who had stayed with the earl's family after falling ill. Consequently, she also passed during the outbreak of the Ashen Nightmare.

"Lady Isabelle's mother was..." Countess Ralshen paused, licking her lips. "Well, she became pregnant without ever sharing who the father was. Lady Isabelle has faced many hardships during her youth because of that. My lord husband and his sister were the only ones to stand up for her, and the three of them became very close, from what I hear."

It made sense. All of them losing their parents to the plague had no doubt deepened the strong ties they already shared. And because of how close they'd been since they were kids, Earl Ralshen gave Lady Isabelle's audacious behavior a pass. That was what his wife was implying.

Behind us, Lilia snorted in dissatisfaction. Obviously she disagreed and felt the need to express it.

As we strode down the quiet corridor together, I decided to voice another question that had been niggling at the back of my mind since we'd arrived. "I'm sorry if this question seems inconsiderate, but has our arrival here left the manor short-staffed?" There were surely people busy looking after Lord Bernard's well-being, but the halls still seemed unusually deserted.

"No," the countess replied, looking apologetic. "A cold seems to be making the rounds among our servants, so they have all taken time off to recover. If you find yourself inconvenienced by the lack of staff, please don't hesitate to let me know and I'll see that you're taken care of."

I reassured her that it wasn't a problem, but it weighed on me. I'd heard similar stories of colds breaking out on my way here. Perhaps that was only natural; such illness was common in the winter months.

As I mulled the matter over in my head, we started to turn the corner, only for one of the earl's manservants to cut us off.

"Terribly sorry, but my lord is currently in the middle of a meeting."

A meeting?

I blinked at the man. Only seconds later, a voice came booming down the hallway, and I swallowed hard when I realized the content

of the conversation.

“...you have some nerve coming all the way here, Alexei Strasser!”

A side glance at the countess told me this had to be her husband, for her face had gone deathly pale.

Which means Earl Ralshen and Alexei must be speaking privately right now.

The latter's voice was too quiet for us to pick up from such a distance, but whatever he had said must have caused offense; the earl's voice echoed down the hall, trembling with anger.

“You don't know what I'm referring to? You sure have gotten clever at playing word games. Did you really think you could waltz in here after ten years and pretend as if nothing had ever happened? Not one day has passed that I haven't thought of my sister and how she died.”

His voice fell low, like a chill creeping across the ground straight toward us, and when his next words followed, they were an icy grip that seized us all by the throat.

“Alexei Strasser, you drove Lindsey to her death.”

An air of doubt hung over us.

Chapter 9: The Bernsteins' Hidden Name

The day of the memorial service arrived. Light snow peppered us on and off, looking almost magical in the way it blanketed the lake. Beside the lake was the memorial monument, a place for people to pray to the souls of the departed. However, it also served as a grim reminder of past mistakes we must be careful never to repeat.

Once the official service finished, I spent my time meeting with local nobles and people in positions of power who had also attended. From their perspective, it was a rare visit from the crown prince's betrothed and gave them an opportunity they wouldn't have otherwise. There were those who approached to cultivate friendly relations, those who came to petition me over matters they were passionate about, and those who were merely curious to see what kind of person I was.

Lord Alexei's shrewd judgment came in handy here as he screened the people who lined up to see me, ensuring the ones I engaged with would give me no trouble. It made the whole ordeal much briefer than it would have been otherwise, granting me some extra leisure time. While I was grateful for Lord Alexei's help, seeing his skills for myself made me feel guilty for pulling him away from his duties back home. I could only imagine how much the prince must be missing his expertise.

As for the suspicions Earl Ralshen had levied against him... Well, after overhearing the conversation, Lilia had immediately clamped her mouth shut. When the matter was over and I sought an explanation from the countess, she'd been on the verge of tears.

I learned that Lady Lindsey Ralshen had been reluctant at the time of her engagement. It even seemed she might back out altogether. Then, tragically, she drowned in the lake after slipping and falling in. Some suspected she'd purposefully thrown herself in because she was so unhappy with her engagement.

I had no way of knowing the truth, and I had no idea how to interpret Lord Alexei's response. For as much emotion as he showed on his face, he might as well have been a statue.

Even so, my thoughts naturally turned to the prince and his motivations. I was certain Lady Lindsey's death had something to do with His Highness sending Lord Alexei to aid me. As for how Lord

Alexei would face his past, well, that was a decision he would have to make. The prince probably wanted him to resolve those issues—at least, that was my humble supposition.

A sigh slipped out of my mouth.

The Malduran delegation must have already arrived at the palace by now, and talks had probably begun. I wondered how that was going. Concern over it lingered in my mind constantly, occupying at least half of my headspace. Not that there was anything I could do from this far away. Besides, I'd made a promise with the prince. I would fulfill my duties, and he would fulfill his.

I pressed a hand over my chest, feeling my heart throb with longing as I recalled the words we'd exchanged.

Since my official duties were finished, I'd wandered off and now found myself alone in a deserted corridor overlooking the lake. As I gazed out through the window in front of me, I sighed to myself. The snow had stopped, but a chill still snaked its way through the halls of the manor, wrapping itself around me.

I was trying to clear my head. This was no time to get preoccupied with personal feelings. Right now, I needed to focus on the grief I felt over Ralshen's past.

And yet...

"Once this is over, all we have to do is wait for the day of our official ceremony, Eli..."

My heart sang and my cheeks heated as I remembered the prince's words. I longed to see him again, more than words could ever express. As the Bibliophile Princess, it seemed ironic I would be so hung up over a real, live human being rather than a book, but my heart was surprisingly genuine about its feelings for him.

I want to hurry back to your side, Prince Christopher...

While I inwardly questioned whether I could fulfill the duties required of me, I found my mind wandering, counting the days until my time here in Ralshen would be over.

I let out another sigh and turned away from the window, intending to walk back the way I'd come when I ran into someone. My body jerked to a halt, and my heart jumped in my throat.

"Grandpa Teddy!"

The old, one-eyed general was standing in front of me. Like me, his breath came out in puffs of white.

"I have something to talk to you about," he said. His expression revealed little about what he was thinking.

The air around him was too intimidating for me to refuse, so I gave a numb nod.

"Elianna Bernstein. If you truly care about this country and its people, please cancel your engagement to Prince Christopher."

I froze. For a moment, I doubted my ears. It was like the words weren't registering in my brain properly. When I finally digested them, my lips grew taut and I fidgeted awkwardly.

"I'm not sure what you're..."

He interrupted, "There's only one time Sauslind's Brain ever steps to the center stage, and that's when the kingdom is at war. Haven't you ever wondered why your house has that hidden name? It's because the Bernsteins always worked in the shadows to guide us during times of war. It's been that way for generations. You're not meant to stand front and center. If you don't want to be the cause of another war, Elianna... If you truly care about the people, then you should give up on your engagement to the prince."

This was the first time I could remember him ever speaking so formally to me. He wasn't censuring me or commanding me, he was merely quietly trying to persuade me.

"W-Wait. You're saying that the Bernsteins...that my house is..." My mind was spinning, unable to catch up with the meaning of his words.

"I figured Eduard hadn't talked to you about this yet." The general sighed quietly. "The only time Sauslind's Brain has come out of the shadows, historically, was when the kingdom needed them as tacticians in battle. You've already heard that previous monarchs' reigns flourished with the help of your family. That's because they led the kingdom to victory. The kings who make history are the ones who lay waste to their enemies. It's been that way since the time of the Hero King. Bernsteins aren't meant to stand in the light, Elianna. Heed my words if you don't want another war."

He was repeating himself now, and I had no idea how to respond. My thoughts were a mess of confusion.

General Bakula continued trying to convince me, slowly backing me into a corner. He was every bit the merciless hero people revered him as.

"I'm sure this must seem like it's coming out of the blue to you, but the Bernsteins have been known as Sauslind's Brain since the time of the Hero King. Back then, three other countries invaded us and we were on the brink of disaster. The person who repelled their siege was one of your ancestors. They helped our countrymen reclaim the land, and their strategies gave birth to modern tactics. But they kept to the shadows as they aided the Hero King, and history has revealed that each time your ancestors came out of hiding there was a war."

"That can't be..."

"Do you remember a long time ago, you once spoke with me about the strategy I used during the Continental Highway War? The reason I became so renowned for that was thanks to the outlandish

schemes your grandfather—Eduard—came up with.”

So that’s the reason my grandfather was so well acquainted with General Bakula?

The old man’s lips peeled back in a self-deprecating smile. “Well, I am proud to say it wasn’t *just* his tactics that claimed us victory. But without his help, who knows if we would have really won or not. That’s the truth. You Bernsteins don’t invest much pride in your abilities. Your grandfather’s distaste for attention is the reason why I’ve received all the credit for that success.”

His single, mahogany-colored eye narrowed on me, pain flickering across it. Searching his gaze, I found concern and the deep affection I was so used to receiving from him.

“I’ve got no idea what Eduard’s thinking,” he continued. “Maybe he never dreamed his granddaughter would fall for the kingdom’s prince. Or maybe he’s got something else in mind. I have no way of knowing. But Elianna, you’ve been pushing for peace these past four years, so you must understand what I’m saying. I’ve seen what war looks like, and I don’t want you to go through that. If I’ve got to be the villain in order to protect you, I’ll do it with honor.”

My vision swam as my head continued to spin. In contrast, Grandpa Teddy remained perfectly calm, his eye steadily trained on me.

“I’m going to make my opposition to your engagement public,” he said.

I sucked in a breath.

If he were to do such a thing, the country would be split in two. Earl Hayden had already expressed his support for our union, and we had come so far to get here. Now the Battle God of the East, General Bakula, was going to oppose us publicly? The military faction at the palace had gained momentum recently. If the nobles weren’t unified in support of us, it could be catastrophic.

My whole body jumped as it hit me.

I see what he’s feeling so apprehensive about...

“It’s the Malduran delegation,” I said, more to myself than Uncle Teddy. “With them visiting, the push for a stronger military is gaining momentum within the kingdom. You’re afraid this is going to transition into war, aren’t you?”

The Bernsteins’ past role in politics and the historical results were weighing on him. His anxieties were only heightened by our long-time enemy sending a delegation here. As a seasoned military general, he had cultivated a keen nose for sniffing out potential conflict. He must have sensed war on the horizon. His opposition here was his attempt to nip one of those seeds of discord in the bud. All of it was to protect Sauslind’s people.

Grandpa Teddy's worries were the exact same as mine. The only difference was the course of action he'd decided to take to combat them.

His expression was both bitter and grim—a complex range of emotions I couldn't entirely decipher. "Eli girl... If I had the choice, I'd never do this to you. I'm partly to blame for being quiet these four years. I didn't want to damage your honor. I wanted to take care of this as neatly as possible. There's still time to do that. All you have to do is give up on Prince Christopher." He spoke softly, voice filled with compassion as he implored me.

I wanted to protest, but I was in no state to make sound, logical arguments. Unrestrained emotions were welling up with me.

Give up on the prince? Now that our love is mutual? After everything we've gone through, all the promises we've made to each other, all of the things we've discussed? When a future with just the two of us is standing right before me?

For a moment, I held my breath, feeling overwhelmed.

A breathless voice interrupted. "Wait just a moment, General Bakula." Lord Alexei was standing there, his hair slightly disheveled. Normally he was the picture of composure, but at present he was gasping for air. He must have been searching everywhere for us.

Soon enough, he managed to compose himself, resuming the usual tight-laced demeanor to which I was accustomed.

"His Highness is already aware of the things you mentioned."

"What...?" The words practically fell out of my mouth.

Lord Alexei's icy blue eyes glanced at me, and he sighed, as if he'd been listening to our conversation the entire time. "The prince would never go into anything unprepared, least of all when it involves Lady Elianna. He's known about her family's hidden name and its meaning for years."

Grandpa Teddy's eye narrowed.

Lord Alexei flashed him a cold smile. It reminded me of the same one the prince had worn on his face when he'd faced Grandpa Teddy before, looking confident and composed.

"I'll convey what the prince said to me verbatim: 'Old men tend to get carried away with their superstitions and believe in them blindly. If you've lost the backbone necessary to bet on a better future for the rest of us, then I would recommend you live out the remainder of your days in the tranquil countryside. It would be a better use of your time than spreading baseless anxiety to the people around you.'"

The general was silent.

Though I might have been ignorant when it came to diplomatic language among nobility, even I noticed the passive aggressive undertone there and had to suck in a breath. The prince was telling

Grandpa Teddy, in no uncertain terms, to retire.

I was also struck by how confident the prince sounded, calling it “superstition” and “baseless anxiety.” This was a serious issue regarding my house and the history of our kingdom. Although he wasn’t here with me, his words filled me with strength. Determination boiled in my gut.

The prince is always protecting me.

“Hmph.” Grandpa Teddy snorted at him. “He might be wet behind the ears, but he can talk a good game, eh? No matter what move he makes, I don’t intend to change my mind. I will oppose his engagement to Eli girl.”

“That’s your choice to make, General. I do, however, question whether the fuss you will inevitably stir by doing so will have the desired effect or not. You’ll only be drawing even more attention to the Bernsteins through your actions.”

My eyes widened. Of course! If the Bernsteins’ role in the past were to be made public, that would only encourage the military faction to take our side. However, given that Grandpa Teddy wanted to avoid war and keep us from being the target of other nobles’ greed, that result ran contrary to what he hoped to accomplish.

The general’s expression remained grave. He opened his mouth to speak, but a sudden burst of noise in the background cut him off.

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As we neared the room where the fuss had originated, we bumped into the earl just outside. Apparently he’d heard the commotion, too. He sneered the second he spotted Lord Alexei, and his face only grew more severe as he stepped through the door.

“What in the world was all that noise?”

Duchess Rosalia was already inside, seated gracefully in a chair. The earl had kept his voice down out of consideration for her, but by his tone, it was evident he wasn’t pleased with what he saw.

“My dear,” his wife remarked in surprise, her voice trembling. She had her hands pressed against Lady Isabelle’s shoulders, holding her back as she stood not far from where Duchess Rosalia was seated. A shattered teacup lay at their feet.

Lilia, who had been in the room from the beginning, slipped over to me and tried to explain the situation. Unfortunately, she didn’t get a chance—a voice filled with unrestrained resentment interrupted her.

“She said I have ‘lowborn blood’!” Isabelle shrieked. “I don’t care that she’s a duchess. That was absolutely unacceptable!”

“Oh goodness,” Duchess Rosalia remarked coldly, her voice as graceful as ever. “I merely said, ‘It makes me question one’s lineage when they’re incapable of conducting themselves in accordance with

their noble status.' I was enjoying some tea with the countess when you, for some reason, bullied your way in. I thought the countess was the lady of this house. Was I mistaken?"

"I'm a part of the earl's house, too! And I've been here a lot longer than the countess has!"

Duchess Rosalia exhaled quietly. The frigid expression on her face made it clear she was done with this conversation since the other side had no intention of listening.

The countess went pale as her husband sighed in exasperation and instructed servants to clean up the broken porcelain.

Incensed at being rebuked and ignored, Lady Isabelle blurted out, "I'm not lying, you know! I really am a member of this household. My father was the late earl!"

Silence fell across the room as everyone stared at her in disbelief, awestruck.

It was the earl who spoke up first, sounding tired of his cousin's antics. "Isabelle, enough of this. You should know very well there are some things that shouldn't be said."

"And what if it's the truth?!" she bellowed at him, sounding like an irate child as her voice echoed through the room. "My mother told me as much before she died! My father really *was* the late earl. But he passed before my mother, so he wasn't able to officially recognize me as his own. I'm telling you, it's true! I really am a member of this house!"

The air in the room went completely still this time. The earl wore a mix of surprise and skepticism on his face, clearly rattled by the accusation.

"And your proof is?" asked Duchess Rosalia, voice like winter frost. "Such a claim is easy to make. If you don't possess convincing proof, however, then your words are nothing more than slander against nobility. That crime applies regardless of whether you're an earl's cousin or not."

My heart ached hearing her say that. The matter of legitimacy struck a bit close to home for the duchess, given all the doubt surrounding Prince Theodore's parentage. It was little wonder why she had no patience for it.

Lady Isabelle's head snapped up. "Of course I have proof!" Her voice was strong with conviction as she spun around and started to stride out of the room.

Before she made it to the door, one of the house's servants stopped her. "Here you are!" the man sang in a cheery voice as he held out a painting toward her.

"How did you know about this...?" Lady Isabelle's eyes widened in shock.

“Don’t worry too much about that. I heard you were taking special care of it, so I merely guessed this was the proof you were referring to.” He shrugged, feigning innocence. “Was I wrong? Do you not need it?”

She swiped the portrait from his hands and proudly turned it toward Duchess Rosalia and Countess Ralshen. “This is it! Sean what’s-his-name, that author guy, drew this piece. My mother said she received it from the late earl. It portrays the water lilies on Layshen Lake, and water lilies are part of the earl’s family crest. I know it isn’t as if a famous artist painted this, but the fact remains he gave my mother something with his family’s crest painted on it. This is surely proof that I carry his blood in my veins.”

Even the earl couldn’t dismiss a claim this serious as a simple emotional outburst.

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?” he demanded.

“Well...” Her voice trailed off as she lost all the bravado she’d had moments ago.

Realization dawned on the earl’s face. “Don’t tell me,” he gasped, eyes coloring with a very different kind of suspicion. “Back then, it seemed like something was weighing on Lindsey. I was sure it had to be her engagement to Alexei Strasser, but...could it be that you...?”

“No!” Lady Isabelle blurted, fumbling desperately to explain. “I didn’t do anything! Yes, okay, I did talk to Lindsey about this. I knew how bad she was with high society, so I told her I would be a much better pick for Lord Alexei’s fiancée. I said that I had the same qualifications she did. But that was it! I didn’t actually *do* anything to her!”

In other words, now the suspicion hung over us that Lady Lindsey’s death wasn’t simply because of a freak accident after all.

My eyes widened in surprise as I took in the events unfolding before me. The earl continued to drill his cousin for more answers, and in the meantime, my gaze wandered to the portrait she was holding. That’s when I noticed something. “Oh my...” I cleared my throat. “Excuse me?”

Their eyes were filled with emotion as they whipped their heads around to look at me. I almost flinched and backed away, but the truth needed to be said, so I forced myself to continue.

“The flowers on that portrait are not water lilies.”



“What?” The two of them regarded me with suspicion, and they weren’t alone; the whole room was peering over at me skeptically.

Lady Isabelle sneered. “What are you talking about? These are obviously water lilies. Are you blind? If you’re that ignorant, keep your mouth shut.”

“Um... They’re lotuses.”

“Excuse me?” Her voice hitched with anger.

Lord Alexei snapped his fingers, realizing where I was going. “The lotus, yes. I’ve heard it’s a symbol of a foreign religion. It’s from the same family as the water lily, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s from a different family. They tend to be found in the great southern continent and the far east, but as you pointed out, they do look quite similar to water lilies. I found them both drawn side by side in a certain theologian’s writings.”

Suddenly, I recalled some other information and added, “The lotus has a wide variety of uses. The roots are edible and you can even make tea leaves from them. I read that they’re effective in easing mental strain for people who are pregnant or have anxious thoughts. Perhaps you should have some imported for Lady Therese?”

His lips thinned in a rare, strained smile. “She and her husband are the ones putting mental strain on everyone else around them. I see no reason to import tea leaves from a distant land when the matter would be solved by them learning some prudence.”

I shrank under the intensity of his cold gaze.

Oh dear, it seems I stuck my nose where it didn’t belong.

“Hold on a minute!” Lady Isabelle’s indignant voice boomed around us. “I don’t care how similar they look. You have no proof that this is a lotus and not a water lily. This is a portrait my mother received from the late earl, and she cared for it greatly. Don’t insult it!” She glowered at me, desperate to protect the sanctity of the art she’d relied upon for years as mental support.

I hesitated on whether to dispute the matter further, but since I’d already discredited her claim, it was my responsibility to see this through.

“There is a way to tell them apart. A water lily has sharp, pointed petals, while the lotus does not. Also, you can see there are water droplets on top of the leaf. Lotus leaves are water repellent. You can seek an expert’s opinion, if you like. They can tell you for certain.”

Lady Isabelle dropped her gaze to the picture, looking utterly crestfallen. All the confidence she’d had before was crumbling away. “Then...why...?” She sounded like a lost child, puzzled over the mystery before her. “Why would he give a picture like this to my mother? And then, why did she...”

My heart ached for her as I recalled the portraits I'd observed in the corridor earlier. The earl's family had looked so close in each one. This was merely my opinion, but I suspected Lady Isabelle's mother had been jealous of that. They had enjoyed a happiness that she hadn't. She must have wanted the same for herself.

Lady Isabelle's mother had also been very sickly, which might have been a factor. When people were weak of body or mind, they often looked for something to cling to. In the process, she must have convinced the young Lady Isabelle that her delusions were reality—"You are the earl's daughter."

Someone like the late earl, who was a patron for no-name artists and helped them climb their way up in the world, would not have hidden her parentage if she truly had been his daughter. At least, that was my personal opinion.

Although it meant revealing my embarrassing obsession with the author who'd created the portrait in question, this piece had value to it, and I felt it important Lady Isabelle knew that.

"There are many amongst the nobility who appreciate Sean Markeld's work. A number of them collect the works of famous authors, composers, and artists. Personal items such as this would fetch a high price with those people. I suspect the late earl gave it to your mother in case either of you ever found yourselves in financial trouble."

"I don't believe it..." Lady Isabelle sank to the floor, her legs giving out from beneath her.

Next it was the earl's chance to pose his questions. "So was Lindsey's death really an accident? Or did she take her own life because Isabelle cornered her? Which is it?" He looked at me expectantly.

I drew my brows, at a loss for how to answer that. In regards to Lady Lindsey's death, there was such a dearth of information that I couldn't possibly draw any conclusion with confidence.

Another, hesitant voice expelled a sigh before saying, "I think I may be the one at fault for Lady Lindsey's passing."

Surprised, everyone turned to look at Lord Alexei.

He dropped his gaze to the floor, voice turning nostalgic as he recalled the past. "That day, I came here to retrieve her so we could ride to the capital together for the wedding. The two of us had barely spoken outside of our first meeting, but I thought we would have plenty of time after the ceremony. I only learned afterward that she'd been troubled over something. It's my fault for not realizing that sooner and talking to her."

As he sincerely accepted responsibility for his part in her death, Lord Alexei somehow seemed like a vulnerable little boy. There was

no trace of the ice demon everyone whispered about in the palace.

Before the earl could butt in, I spoke up. "What were the last words the two of you shared?"

Lord Alexei gave me a suspicious look. "Lady Lindsey wasn't the type to lead a conversation." He paused, giving my question serious consideration as he tried to recall the answer. "She asked me if I would accept white water lilies from her. Said it was a present one gave to their betrothed."

"And how did you answer?"

"Well...she was my fiancée. I told her I'd gladly accept them." He furrowed his brows, worried he'd somehow screwed up back then by saying that.

I found their exchange endearing, but at the same time, there was something bittersweet and painful about realizing the feelings of the departed. My chest swelled with emotion.

"Most of the water lilies in Layshen Lake are either crimson or some similar hue," I said. "Completely white ones are said to be exceptionally rare and precious. They represent a pure heart."

Lady Lindsey had wanted to present Lord Alexei with said flower. She must have gone out to the lake to pick it herself, rather than leave the task to a servant or anyone else. After all, she was going to give it to her fiancé. It was a representation of her commitment to their future together.

And, most likely...

I didn't continue that thought any further, but Lady Isabelle could imagine what I was thinking. Her tears fell one after the other. As she sobbed, the countess gently embraced her. The young earl, in the meanwhile, went completely silent.

Curious, Lilia asked me in a whisper, "About that author, Mister Sean...why did he draw lotuses instead of water lilies?"

"Well..." I paused, reflecting on his writings. "He did write a book on religion. Perhaps that's why he thought to use the lotus instead."

Even after that, I continued to mull the matter over in my head. There was something that had been weighing on me for a long time, and I felt like I was on the cusp of fitting all the pieces together.

Religion and a flower...

Beside me, Lilia mumbled, "He came all the way to a lake famous for its water lilies only to draw something else? Sounds like a crazy eccentric to me."

A soft laugh filled the air, quiet enough not to disrupt the atmosphere in the room. When I looked up, Duchess Rosalia was smiling at me the way she only did with those to whom she was closest.

"With you in our midst, the royal family's secrets may all be

unraveled someday.” The way she spoke, it was as if she prayed that would be the case. However, in the next moment, her smile faded and she collapsed forward, tumbling out of her chair.

“Duchess Rosalia!”

“Mother!”

Lord Alexei and I both rushed toward her. The way she was struggling to breathe made it hard to believe she’d been sitting in her chair like a regal noblewoman this entire time. Now she looked as though she might faint entirely at any moment. I was impressed by the grit it must have required to endure this long, but I was also frustrated at myself for not realizing sooner.

Come to think of it, stirring up such a fuss wasn’t in Duchess Rosalia’s character to begin with. She wasn’t the type to clash with other people. She always conducted herself with grace befitting her social position. Perhaps she’d been ill this entire time.

“Call a doctor,” Lord Alexei instructed.

In my head, it felt like all the information I had collected was finally coming together.

It can’t be.

A chill ran through me, my hands trembling as I reached for Duchess Rosalia’s arm.

“Please pardon me for doing this,” I said as I rolled up her sleeve. Hidden under the fabric was a bright red rash. Seeing it felt like a sharp blow to the gut, and I swallowed hard.

“Lady Elianna?” Lord Alexei quirked a brow at me, but I couldn’t answer him.

A red rash wasn’t an uncommon cold symptom. But...there could be a chance...

“Earl Ralshen, I know your region has a large number of business dealings with the neighboring Azul Region. But do you also have transactions with the Diana company? Or any companies that are connected with them?”

“The Diana company?” He hesitated, wracking his brain. After a moment, he shrunk back and said, “No, I don’t think so. That company is...”

Lord Alexei’s stiff voice cut him off. “You can’t mean what I think you do.”

Said company was famous in the capital and in the west.

“I’m not certain yet,” I said, shaking my head. The two of us worked together to carry the duchess to a separate room.

But we have to do something to confirm whether my suspicions are true or not, I thought, my mind working at breakneck speed.

“Lord Alan,” I said, “tell the doctor to use pomelo fruit or some other highly acidic fruit juice and soak her hand in it so we can

diagnose her. Do the same for everyone else in the earl's house who has been complaining of cold symptoms."

"Understood," said the manservant who had carried in Lady Isabelle's portrait before. His shoulders fell as he said, "You know, I've already given up hope. I knew you wouldn't recognize me. That's right, I'm actually Alan—wait, did you say my name?!"

The young man, with his honey-colored hair and sharp emerald green eyes, did his own bizarre comedy routine before scrambling to obey my instructions.

"Yes, right away!"

I watched as he darted out of the room, and then I clasped my hands together, praying that these fears were unfounded.

Chapter 10: The Heart Which Believes

Sadly, my prayers were not answered.

The doctor's face was deathly pale as he exited Duchess Rosalia's room. His voice was grave as he gave us the verdict. "It's the Ashen Nightmare."

I sucked in a breath. The whole room seemed to freeze over with tension. That name embodied fear itself—the Ashen Nightmare.

It began with symptoms that resembled a cold. After an incubation period that lasted anywhere from ten to twenty days, a person would develop ashen-colored flecks across their skin. All the other issues that accompanied it mirrored any other sickness: high fever, vomiting, and violent coughing. You could only distinguish it as the plague once the ashen-colored flecks began to appear, but shortly after, the person affected would lose consciousness and fall into a coma. Those flecks would spread across their entire body...and then they would die.

The reason it was also known as the Sleeping Sickness was because once those spots appeared, most never regained consciousness and instead died in their sleep. The ashen coloring that swallowed them whole was like a nightmare, and so people named it thusly. The bright red rash, which Duchess Rosalia had on her skin, was only a precursor. It would darken eventually to match the disease's namesake.

There was an audible gulp as someone asked, "Are you certain?"

The only people present in the room to hear the doctor's report were General Bakula, Lord Alexei, Earl and Countess Ralshen, and myself. There were a few others close to us whom we felt trustworthy enough to include as well, such as Lord Alan, Lilia, and a few of the earl's servants, but that was it.

Despite his pallid complexion, this man was a trained doctor, and as befitting of his occupation, he relayed the facts. "It's as Lady Elianna feared. I used the diagnostic agent to confirm whether she had the plague or not, and there's no mistake. The test has been compulsory ever since this illness ravaged our kingdom before. It's the only way for us to distinguish it between ordinary cold symptoms. But in recent years, doctors have been less adamant about performing it because of the costs associated."

Another loud gulp.

It was two years after the Ashen Nightmare swept that land that we discovered a way of testing to diagnose people. Prior to that, anyone who showed symptoms of a cold was isolated with the plague victims, which resulted in those who'd only had an ordinary cold contracting the plague as well. That only furthered the spread of the devastation. Chief Herbalist Nigel, of the palace's Pharmacy Lab, was the one who discovered and developed the diagnostic agent. Sadly, sixteen years had passed since the original outbreak and doctors had fallen lax in administering the test.

Lord Alexei shook his head, recomposing himself as he stroked his chin and contemplated how to approach the issue. He seemed less content to dwell on his frustration with the past and more focused on what move to make next. It was little wonder why he was the prince's right hand, what with his ability to recover so quickly.

"The Diana company has a monopoly on the sale of pomelo fruit. Either way, we can't count on them much right now. Most of it would rot before it made it here. As Lady Elianna proposed, we'll have to rely on other highly acidic fruits to perform the test. Ralshen produces very little fruit, however. We'll have to send an emergency missive to Azul and Gral. We also need to send someone to inform the palace of this outbreak."

Lord Alan and the other servants immediately began scurrying about. Meanwhile, Earl Ralshen was still staring blankly forward as if in a daze. Lord Alexei seized him by the shoulders, bringing him back to reality.

"Carl, I need you to pull yourself together. You are the regional lord. Protecting the people of Ralshen is your duty."

"Y-Yeah..." The young earl managed a hesitant nod, but his face was pale with remembered fear from his youth.

When Lord Alan returned to the room, he had a soldier following behind him. "Alex! An express messenger from the capital is here."

Everyone's eyes turned to the soldier. He was still gasping for air, having hurried here, when he took to his knee to pay his respects to all of us. There was an insignia on the back of his hand as well as his collar, displaying the royal family's red falcon—a clear indication that this was an emergency correspondence. The symbol drawn on the back of his hand was done in a method similar to henna and was a secret sign used by the royal family in times of crisis.

General Bakula and Lord Alexei nodded at the man, who promptly gave his name. Afterward, Lord Alexei used the code name for the royal family in order to confirm the man's identity. Said name was from an ancient language used only for urgent matters.

Once we were certain of his affiliation, Lord Alexei accepted the

letter from him and started to pass it over toward me. The soldier interrupted us, however, with a shocking revelation.

"Pardon, but this matter is so dire I must share the most important bit before you read the rest: the king has collapsed."

"What...?"

"The Ashen Nightmare has taken hold of him."

"Impossible," Lord Alexei gasped.

My heart froze in my chest as I stared at the soldier. This implied the new outbreak had started not from the northern territories this time but from the capital...?

And the prince is there, too...

Tension strained the messenger's face. His voice was heavy as he continued, and his words snuffed out any composure we might have mustered after the earlier shock. "The military faction has also taken the Malduran delegation captive. Maldura's army is at our border, staring down the Edea Domain. We're within an inch of all-out war."

"No, that can't be! How could this happen?!" This time it was Grandpa Teddy's turn to raise his voice in disbelief.

The soldier shrank back in fear at the intensity of the general's gaze, but the urgency on his face remained unchanged. "The reason they decided to visit us is because an epidemic broke out in their country, and they came here hoping for a cure. And it seems...that epidemic is actually the Ashen Nightmare. The military faction claimed they purposefully brought the sickness to our lands and infected the king. They said it was equivalent to a declaration of war and arrested the delegation. General Bakula, I must ask that you return to the palace at once. We're about to go to war with Maldura!"

We were all dumbstruck by these revelations.

The normally quiet countess stumbled, as if on the brink of fainting. Her husband rushed to her aid, holding her steady. I could empathize with her; I was squeezing my hands so tightly my knuckles had turned white.

All of us were speechless. The one who finally cut through the tension in the room was the general, his voice harsh and low. "Elianna Bernstein, renounce your engagement to Prince Christopher immediately."

I sucked in a sharp breath and turned to face him. He wasn't gazing at me fondly as he usually did. He wore the face of a battle-hardened general, intent on protecting his country.

"Maldura is ill suited for naval warfare. If we reinforce the number of our ships in the bay, we can ward them off from launching an invasion. That will require us to strengthen our ties with the Miseral Dukedom. Prince Christopher can take Lady Mireille as his concubine and Duke Odin's daughter as his queen. That would be the

best method of stopping the conflict before it starts.”

Queen Henrietta originally hailed from House Odin, and they had strong ties with the dukedom. The daughter in question was my good friend, Lady Pharmia.

I was at a loss for words, having completely forgotten to even breathe as I stared back at him.

“Wait a moment,” Lord Alexei cut in. “We can find other methods. We don’t need to—”

“What methods? Go on, tell me, Alexei Strasser.” The old general barked at him like an old man scolding a child for their inexperience. “Do you suggest we let Elianna marry him and go to war instead? You want a repeat of history, to subject the Bernstein house to leading us through a war once again? Is that what Prince Christopher desires?”

Lord Alexei gritted his teeth, showing more emotion on his face than I’d ever seen before.

The general continued pressing him, not letting up for a moment. “The pomelo fruit is all we have to combat the Ashen Nightmare. Miseral is the chief producer of that fruit. The Diana company is the one with exclusive rights to it, and they’re owned by Duke Odin. Our best bet to avoid the war and the plague is to strengthen ties to his house. Surely you are intelligent enough to understand this.”

Lord Alexei ground his teeth, indicating that even he could think of no better option at present.

General Bakula sneered, his expression mocking and bitter as he spat, “I’d find it pretty suspicious even if you said you had some kind of countermeasure for this situation. No matter what your opponent might come at you with, you have to think one step ahead of them. Prince Christopher wasn’t able to do that. This is his loss. It’s time to accept reality.” He was an old man reproaching the young for their naivety.

His lone eye turned toward me next. “Elianna, you know what’s best here as well. If the prince is really as wise as they say, then he should already understand the position he’s in. In fact, they may have already started taking measures in the capital and simply neglected to include it in their message to us.” He glanced briefly at the soldier, but the latter only frowned in response.

The general sighed and turned back toward me, his eye sharp and narrowed. “I can stop the military faction, Elianna, but we haven’t a moment to lose. I’ll vouch for you. Say you’ll renounce your engagement to Prince Christopher so we can stop this war.”

The situation was like a heavy weight bearing down on my shoulders. Scared, I retreated back a step.

By annulling my engagement, we could stop the war and protect Sauslind’s people. That was the best option we had at our disposal

right now. Surely even the prince would agree it was a necessary sacrifice...right?

I had no idea what the prince would think if he were in my shoes. I felt like I was sinking, as if the air around me were water, swallowing me up and clogging my lungs.

This sensation was only interrupted when a new emergency messenger appeared.

Noise broke out beyond the door as someone's strained voice bellowed, "Where is the earl?!"

The lord of the manor was already at his limit from the deluge of urgent information. His voice was like thunder as he whipped around. "What is it this time?!"

"Pardon me, my lord!" The messenger barged in through the doors, forgetting all decorum as he blurted out the news. "A revolt has broken out—in the village at the foot of Mt. Urma. The residents have taken the mayor and the other officials hostage. They've barricaded themselves inside the town hall!"

"What did you say?!" He took the words like a blow to the gut, standing frozen with his face devoid of all emotion.

Undaunted, the messenger continued to relay what he knew. "It's the Ashen Nightmare! Earl, an enormous number of victims have started to appear. The residents are all terrified it'll be just like it was sixteen years ago, that Ralshen will again be a land of the dead. They think the capital will just desert us again. That's why they're doing this. Please," his shrill voice pleaded, "your orders!"

The young earl was at a complete loss for how to react.

General Bakula glanced briefly at the region's lord before stepping forward to take command. "Send in the regional army. They should be able to suppress the uprising. We don't have time to deal with a revolt right now."

"That's unacceptable!" I burst out.

Everyone turned their attention toward me as I balled my hands into painful, trembling fists. Something inside me was loudly protesting that the general's way of handling this wasn't correct.

"Elianna," he started, trying to placate me.

I ignored him. "We mustn't subjugate an uprising with military force. That will only spread despair and mistrust among the region's subjects—and the rest of Sauslind's people, as well. An army exists to protect its people, not to harm them. I cannot allow you to give that order!"

"Then what would you have us do? Leave them to revolt and head into battle with Maldura instead?"

"No."

Emotion was raging inside me, and the situation was so dizzying

that my thoughts were in a knotted, confused mess. We were on the brink of war with Maldura. To stop it, the best option was for me to annul my engagement to the prince. Then there was House Odin, the Ashen Nightmare, the king falling ill, Duchess Rosalia's current condition, and now this uprising. Unease gripped the Ralshen Region as people feared being abandoned by their own country once again.

It was hard to breathe, feeling the weight of all this crushing down on me. As I struggled to pull myself together, I felt a whisper in my ear—a recollection.

Eli, take a deep breath.

I paused a moment to close my eyes and inhale. Earlier, I had taken a step back out of fear, but now I took one forward. When I next opened my eyes, they were filled with determination.

“I will go.”

“Lady Elianna!” Lord Alexei was the one who gasped out my name this time, in an unusual display of emotion. “Your suggestion is more absurd than the general's! Your duty is to make haste back to the capital immediately. If we are to stop war with Maldura, we'll need to consult the prince. You can leave everything in Ralshen to me.”

Despite the series of upsets this past hour, he had already composed himself and was considering how to deal with the crises we faced. I was sure that beneath all of that, he had to be concerned about his mother's welfare as well.

Undeterred, I replied, “Everyone in the region knows that the prince's betrothed is visiting. If I were to leave for the capital now, they would all believe the royal family had abandoned them. By heading to their village instead, I can quell their revolt. Lord Alexei, I would ask that you stay here and oversee the medical team.”

“But...” He was clearly hesitating.

We knew now there was a huge outbreak of the Ashen Nightmare around the foot of Mt. Urma. The king and Duchess Rosalia had already fallen victim. There was no guarantee I might not be infected as well.

Nonetheless, I relayed to him what I'd seen these past four years with my own eyes. “No cure has yet been found for the Ashen Nightmare, but we *have* developed medicine that can subdue its progression. This hasn't been made public because we thought the plague had already subsided this past decade, and we also have yet to conduct clinical trials for it. However, we are making serious strides toward conquering this illness.”

The Ashen Nightmare wasn't incurable. Just as we had come up with a diagnostic agent to identify those affected by it, doctors and researchers were working daily toward a solution. These people never stood at the forefront of history, but their efforts accumulated over the

years. They were the ones who gave us the courage to stand up against such a lethal illness.

"I am the betrothed of Crown Prince Christopher Selkirk Ashelard, but I have no right calling myself such if I don't protect the citizens of this kingdom. This is my duty. The royal family will not abandon Ralshen's people again."

I glanced over at the earl—happy to see emotion returning to his face finally—and then turned toward Grandpa Teddy. "General Bakula, I will not renounce my engagement to the prince. I'm not going to choose between this kingdom's people and His Highness. We will stop this war without use of military force."

"What?" someone in the room blurted out, effectively echoing the surprise of everyone present. Only the general was cool and composed.

"How do you expect to accomplish that?" he asked.

"We'll find a cure for the Ashen Nightmare."

Maldura was known as a warmongering country. The reason they had gone to such lengths and formed a delegation to send to their longtime enemy was because they wanted a cure for the epidemic. They were likely feeling the effects far more intensely than Sauslind right now.

"A cure hasn't been found these past sixteen years. You really think it's going to be that easy to come up with one?" His stare was intense.

I pressed a hand over my chest, tracing the outline of the charm His Highness had sent along with me. Then I lifted my head and met his gaze head on. "Yes, now. Precisely because sixteen years have already passed. General Bakula, do you truly think His Highness and I have learned nothing from the outbreak back then? The research facility we built in the capital doubles as a treatment center, and it was created for this express purpose. We haven't given up hope."

Once the Ashen Nightmare had calmed down, the Pharmacy Lab was promptly relegated to the shadows. Nonetheless, none of the researchers there had ceased their efforts to study the sickness. They'd seen the catastrophic losses our kingdom had suffered as people buried family members, and they swore to never let such a tragedy repeat itself—that they would find a cure this time, no matter what. No one had given up, and knowing that gave me strength.

"Prince Christopher isn't the type to step into war so easily," I said. "I would never trust a politician who gave up without a fight and jumped into a conflict, full well knowing how many lives would be lost as a result. I know His Highness wouldn't do something like that."

My heart was so full of love for him, and I could easily recall the affection in his eyes as he looked at me. The memories made me eager

to see him again.

“General, wasn’t it you who once told me that when one is faced with the impossible, that’s when their strength is truly tested?”

His gaze wavered, as if shaken by my words.



This was way back when I lived in our family's region. My world had been filled with books, and I had thought I didn't need anything else. After moving to the capital and being engaged to the prince, however, my world had expanded dramatically. There were things outside of books now that I wanted to protect. People I cared for, friends and acquaintances alike. Then there was the man I loved, more precious and irreplaceable than anything. I would do anything to keep those people safe, no matter what it took.

"I choose Prince Christopher *and* Sauslind's people. Grandpa Teddy, I made a promise to His Highness."

He swallowed hard, and I knew he was hesitating.

Remembering the words I exchanged with the prince, I smiled. "We said we would fair the storm together, no matter how rough the seas. I know His Highness won't do anything to endanger our people. I trust him."

I had to do what I could. The prince had entrusted Ralshen to me, and I believed solving the issues here would help him back in the palace as he dealt with the other crises we were facing.

Briefly, I glanced at the general, who had fallen silent, and recomposed myself. The first order of business was to check with the messenger from the palace and see if any other victims had been reported besides His Majesty, either from the capital or the other regions.

"Several people have fallen ill within the capital. As for the other regions, there was no news of outbreaks there at the time I left the palace to come here."

I nodded, mulling the information over in my head before giving out orders. "We need to send an emergency missive to the palace's Pharmacy Lab and the medical treatment center. They're the only ones with the formula for the medicine that can suppress the Ashen Nightmare. Since there are already people in the capital who are infected, the prince has probably already surmised that the illness will spread. I suspect he'll arrange for an official announcement to have prescriptions for the medicine sent out across the kingdom. We need to get our hands on that as soon as possible!"

Lord Alexei flinched in surprise and opened his mouth to say something, but he was preempted by someone else.

"Actually about that," a blithe voice cut in as someone raised their hand. It was Lord Alan, still dressed up like a manservant. "I think I'm probably carrying the formula with me."

"You what?!" Lord Alexei's exclamation came out as a rumbling, icy growl. I was similarly stunned.

Lord Alan scratched at his cheek. "Chief Herbalist Nigel slipped it

to me secretly. Something like, ‘Kehehe, this is the recipe for a secret medicine.’ I thought maybe the old man drank one too many of his experimental flasks and went nuts, but I’m guessing it’s probably exactly what you were looking for.”

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?!”

“I mean, come on, I would have never dreamed it was a drug suppressant for the Ashen Nightmare. I didn’t even know such a thing existed. Nor did I think we’d ever see a resurgence of the plague.” Lord Alan shrugged defenselessly before turning to the doctor. “Uh, doc, help me out here?”

If the intensity of Lord Alexei’s gaze had the ability to freeze, Lord Alan would have been a solid statue. Intimidated, Lord Alan scrambled over to the middle-aged doctor, ducking behind his back. He then slipped out a scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it over.

The doctor ran his eyes over the formula, confusion and skepticism written clear as day on his face. Gradually, his features relaxed and his eyes lit up. “Maybe...” he muttered, hope filling his voice. “We have to combine the trine fruit with raw smishio root... It’s still a very novel idea, but they should negate each others’ effects... No, the components of the raw root are different than we originally thought, according to the latest medical writings, but... No, wait.” The doctor had entered his own little world, mumbling to himself incoherently.

“Doctor,” Lord Alexei interrupted coldly, “this is a race against time. I need you to test the effects of that medicine immediately. Write down any ingredients you don’t have enough of, and we’ll gather them all starting with the most urgent.”

Those words were like a spear of ice that broke the doctor out of his reverie. He straightened his posture and said, “Yes, at once!” The way he promptly darted out of the room reminded me of Lord Alan a little bit ago.

Lord Alan followed the doctor out with a look of utter devastation on his face, his whole body trembling. “Oh, Gods, if this isn’t the medicine I think it is and is some kind of trick instead, I might as well start digging my own grave now...”

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The carriage that had brought us to Ralshen was of a much sturdier build than the one we were in now, which was more simple and lightweight, made for speed and maneuverability. My attendant and I were huddling close together, in part to share warmth and in part because the roads were so rough we were nearly bouncing off the seats.

Said attendant's name was Mabel Carter. She was actually a maid from House Strasser—the same one who had mentioned the topic of midwives being used as doctors before. She also had medical knowledge as well.

After a surprising series of emergencies, we spent two days scrutinizing the information that had come in. We confirmed that the formula Chief Herbalist Nigel had sent along was indeed medicine to subdue the Ashen Nightmare. There was an official proclamation, made under His Highness's name, that stated as much. As I set off on the carriage they'd prepared for me, I was equipped with this announcement and the medicine we'd hastily prepared. I also had a doctor and three herbalists accompanying me.

Lilia clung to me in tears up until I left, saying, "Miss Eli, you don't have to go!" At the last second, she decided, "Fine, then I'm going with you! I am your attendant, after all!" However, I stopped her.

There was something else I wanted her to do. Yes, part of it was my own ego—I didn't want to put her in danger by bringing her with me to the source of an outbreak. But more importantly, we needed to know how the plague was spreading throughout Ralshen. Where had it come from? And what parts of the region was it affecting most now? Plus, Lord Alexei was busy helping oversee all of this and couldn't return to the capital to see what was happening there. Lilia was someone I could trust to check things out on my behalf.

Depending on the victim count, we would need to secure provisions and supplies for treatment. There was a distinct possibility that the reserves the Ralshen earldom possessed wouldn't be enough. I sent requests for aid to those who had attended the memorial service and lived nearby, borrowing the royal family's influence to do so.

We had doctors and herbalists available, but there was a limit to how much manpower we could split up between all the areas affected—the earl's manor, the cities, and the areas along the highways. I asked Lord Alexei to bring the situation under control and distribute such professionals and supplies as necessary. As for Lilia, I convinced her to stay behind by promising to have her follow me later and bring any additional provisions the neighboring lords sent.

Of course, no one approved of the prince's betrothed going out there alone. That was where Mabel came in. She volunteered to accompany me, saying, "I have a bit of medical knowledge myself. I should be able to help out when we get there."

Despite the fear in her eyes, the courage it took her to step forward was undeniable. She knew the danger. A revolt was taking place at our destination, and emotions would be running high. Ralshen's people didn't trust those from the royal family. To make

matters worse, the Ashen Nightmare was infesting the region. It required conviction, even for a palace maid, to walk into a life-threatening situation.

Lord Alexei and General Bakula appointed her as my temporary attendant. Though the former was still hesitant until the very end to send me, I convinced him by saying, "I'm doing this so we don't have a second or third uprising." His expression was the very picture of reluctance. Lord Alexei wanted to send me straight back to the capital; that much was clear. But at last he made the arrangements to send me to the foot of Mt. Urma.

"I'll send reinforcements soon." His words were of great comfort, despite his icy cold expression.

As for General Bakula, he was faced with two options: rally the Black Wing Knights and head for the capital, or return to their base at the eastern border and keep their eyes peeled for any movement from our neighbors. In the end, he decided...

"I will command your escort, Lady Elianna." He held his chin high, sounding like an obstinate old man.

And so, now I sat in a carriage, on our way to suppress the uprising. Mabel and Lord Alan were accompanying me, both with similarly odd expressions on their faces. It took me a moment to realize they were tensing their jaws so they didn't accidentally bite their tongues. I almost laughed when I imagined myself making the same goofy face.

As the horses' hooves clopped along the road and the carriage creaked and groaned, I peered out the window. The Black Wing Knights were riding alongside us. Since I had refused to use military power, General Bakula insisted they were only coming along for my protection. "We are only guarding the prince's betrothed—that's the extent of our role here," he said.

With that excuse, I couldn't turn him down, but I was still hesitant. General Bakula, realizing he had no other choice, compromised. "I promise we won't aim our swords at the people. Once we get there and confirm there's no threat, we'll pull back. Will you accept my conditions then?"

"I'm surprised you would agree to that," I said. It warmed my heart that he'd taken my feelings into account.

Nonetheless, his eye promptly narrowed. "But I'm only giving you twenty days."

I nodded, though it felt like a dagger in the chest. As the Battle God of the East, he had more important things to prioritize than his personal feelings. He had experienced a number of wars when he served the previous king, and that was exactly why he didn't want a repeat of the past. For that purpose, he had no trouble suppressing his

affection for me. It came second nature as a general.

When we were waiting for confirmation of the chief herbalist's formula and for official information to come in, we gathered together to have another meeting. And by we, I mean Lord Alexei, Earl Ralshen, General Bakula, and a few other prominent people we could trust. We decided I would head to quell the uprising at Mt. Urma. Since I was the prince's betrothed, my presence in a place with a massive outbreak would reassure people and snuff out any anxiety or ill rumors. It would also give the people hope that even if they fell victim to the plague, the kingdom wouldn't abandon them. We had the neighboring lords spread word of our plans in their lands as well.

The Black Wing Knights sent an urgent missive to the Edea Domain telling them not to move a muscle, but tensions were already high there with them staring down Maldura's forces. With both sides chomping at the bit, there was no telling what might send us into open war. There was a limit to how much His Highness could contain the military faction, as well.

My deadline for reversing all of these problems was twenty days. General Bakula refused to budge on that. I needed to find some kind of cure or a medicine to deal with the Ashen Nightmare in that time—or at least some promising lead. At present, Sauslind possessed medicine to diagnose the plague and medicine to slow its progression. That wasn't enough. Prolonging the illness would only rob people of their stamina. They would die anyway if that happened.

We needed a cure. Finding one was the number one priority right now. If I wasn't able to accomplish that, General Bakula would use the power of his name to annul my engagement. Or perhaps war would break out between Maldura and Sauslind before it even came to that. Either outcome was ghastly. That was as far as General Bakula could concede, however.

I was anxious about a number of things as well, but I had no choice other than to accept his compromise in the end. No matter how urgent finding a cure for the Ashen Nightmare was, we also had to take into account the danger of conflict breaking out in the Edea Domain. General Bakula was right; even without his conditions, I realistically only had twenty days to do something. And perhaps even that was a stretch.

I bit down on my lip. That deadline was looming over me. I thought back to the doctors and herbalists at the treatment facility and at the Pharmacy Lab. They possessed knowledge from foreign nations, various tomes, and heaps of information. They had all worked desperately these past sixteen years to develop a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. My only option was to rely on them, since I had no specialized knowledge on the matter.

However, there had to be *something* I could do. And as I desperately wracked my brain for what, Chief Herbalist Nigel came to mind. He had given Lord Alan his formula for subduing the illness, which made me think he must have predicted the outbreak here in the Ralshen Region. There were more important matters to attend to, so I didn't let my thoughts linger on that for long.

Instead, I recalled everything he'd taught me and the conversations we'd had together. They all led to one thing: *Furya's Jar*. It was a legendary tome containing the formulas for medicines that could cure all the world's ails. Chief Herbalist Nigel dismissed relying on such an item, given that we didn't even know if it really existed. But there must have been some kind of hint in that conversation. What was he trying to tell me back then? I was sure it had to be something important.

There were some victims of the plague at the earl's manor who'd already developed the ashen-colored flecks on their skin. Duchess Rosalia's rash would eventually change color as well. We didn't yet know how far His Majesty's illness had progressed, and the fact that the king had contracted it meant others could be infected as well, such as the prince.

I squeezed Mabel's hand. She glanced over at me, but I didn't even have the strength to tell her it was nothing. My chest ached as soon as the anxious thoughts began.

Now that the Ashen Nightmare had infiltrated our borders, it could spread anywhere and everywhere. The only thing I could do was subdue people's discontent and search for some kind of hint as to how we might cure this disease.

If I couldn't, then...

I swallowed back the fears that came bubbling up. I second guessed myself numerous times, wondering if this was really the right action to take as the prince's fiancée. But somehow, I was sure that if the prince were in my position, he would be doing the exact same thing I was. Comforted by that thought, I lifted my head, catching Mabel's gaze.

At that exact same moment, a horse brayed and our carriage rocked, coming to a screeching stop that would have sent me flying if not for Mabel yanking me toward her.

"...Ngh."

My head was left spinning from the impact. I blinked back the pain to find Mabel pinned beneath me on the floor. She must have slammed into it hard.

"Mabel!"

Her face contorted in anguish, but she gasped a faint, "I'm all right."

Lord Alan was also grimacing, having been flung against the wall as well. He peeled himself up off the floor, grumbling, "What was—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the sound of steel on steel interrupted him. An urgent voice soon followed, bellowing, "We're under attack!"

I sucked in a breath and started toward the window.

"Lady Elianna!" Lord Alan cut me off, but the combination of strained voices and clashing swords outside was illuminating enough without me having to see it for myself.

One of the Black Wing Knights shouted, "Do you realize who you're attacking? These carriages belong to the royal family!"

"Their archers are taking aim from the top of cliffs to our right!" Grandpa Teddy warned before giving orders to someone who was riding in the carriage behind us. "Jean, the driver's dead. You'll need to take his place!"

Although my manservant didn't respond, I could picture him saying, "Yeah, you don't gotta tell me twice."

Mabel and I both trembled as the clashing of steel echoed around us.

After a few moments, the carriage lurched forward with a groan. Lord Alan slid the small driver's window open to confirm who was in the seat. "Jean?" His voice didn't sound as relaxed as it usually did.

"It's a surprise attack," Jean answered. "They're after the miss. Give up on the other carriage."

"We can't possibly...!" The doctor, the herbalists, and all of our supplies were in that carriage.

I threw open the window to peek out. If not for Mabel and Lord Alan stopping me, I would have poked my entire upper body through the opening. Even with their interference, however, I couldn't give up—that carriage was our only hope, and we were leaving it behind.

The ground was covered in snow. Our attackers were spread about, engaging the Black Wing Knights. My heart froze over and my fingers clutched tightly at the window frame.

There were a few guards running alongside our carriage. One of them was Grandpa Teddy. He steered his horse closer when he noticed me sticking my head out.

"Elianna, these men were likely lying in wait for us. There's a good chance someone leaked our information."

"Impossible..." That revelation left me dumbfounded.

His gaze burrowed into me, trying to impress the grim reality of our situation. "The country was far too well prepared for war to break out. There are far too many suspicious coincidences. Elianna, focus not on the enemy you can see but the shadow that lurks in the darkness. Knowing you, I'm sure you'll be able to defeat it."

“I don’t know what to say...”

Ever since our conversation several days ago, I got the impression that Grandpa Teddy had grand expectations of the Bernstein family. His words tugged at my heart, bringing me to tears as I gazed back at him.

His eye softened for a moment, despite the gravity of our situation. He looked at me with the same affection he had before, like he was seeing his granddaughter for the first time after being separated for years.

“Eli girl, you’ve grown a lot in the four years since I last saw you. You’ve developed much differently than I feared. Maybe you can rewrite the history of your family and become a queen worthy of this country. If these old bones of mine can protect you in the meantime, then it was worth living to this ripe old age.”

As he spoke, he turned to deflect a vicious, oncoming attack.

“Grandpa Teddy!”

“Go, Elianna! I believe in you, so you better believe in yourself! Do what you need to do!”

I opened my mouth to call his name again, but at the same instant, an arrow came whizzing from the opposite direction and pierced right through Grandpa Teddy’s back. The scene was so graphic it burned itself into my eyes.

Before I knew what was happening, I was screaming uncontrollably.

“No, no! No... Grandpa Teddy!”

The guards who had been riding alongside us engaged our attackers. Dark, ugly red stained the snow, and gradually, the sight of the carnage receded, taking my strangled cries with it.

Mabel and Lord Alan pried me from the window and tried to comfort me, but I only slapped my hands over my face and continued to sob.

Unfortunately, the tragedy wasn’t over.

Our sprinting carriage again slowed to a full stop.

Lord Alan peeked out the window to see what was going on. There was a tremor in his voice as he murmured, “We’re surrounded.”

A few days later, an emergency message arrived at the capital of Saura. It was an urgent report for Prince Christopher, sent by Lord Alexei Strasser in the Ralshen Region. The note read:

General Theoden Bakula of the Black Wing Knights was killed by an unknown assailant. We haven’t been able to confirm whether Lady Elianna Bernstein survived the attack or not.

Arc 2: The Phantom's Serenade

Verse 1: Secret Girl Talk

A voice trickled into my ear.

“This was a bit of a surprise.”

The lights began to dim in anticipation of the curtain opening, and the air around us filled with excitement. Sirius Ensemble was giving a performance at the Royal Opera House. It was a famous theater. One of Sauslind's kings from several generations back had developed a love for the arts and had done his utmost in calculating every little nuance for this building, including how the sound would echo.

There were seats on the second floor reserved for the royal family's use. That was where I, Elianna Bernstein, sat as I waited on pins and needles for the show to begin. I lifted my gaze from the stage to the man beside me.

Even through the darkness, his blond hair was dazzling. Prince Christopher flashed me a handsome smile. As I began to tilt my head, he spoke gently and continued his earlier line of thought. “I didn't expect to ever hear you say you wanted to come see an opera. I should have been the one to invite you. What a shame.”

I smiled and shook my head.

As soon as the New Year break ended, I found myself in the prince's office. He showed little regard for those who might be watching as he pressed close and said, “You promised you would spend time with me, Eli.”

The romantic air in the room sent Lord Alexei over the edge. The atmosphere took a chilly turn, at least until he realized that the prince gave his indignation no heed. Then Lord Alexei cradled his head as if fighting back another migraine and said, “I'll give you half a day. Whether you spend that privately in your room together or go off somewhere else, I don't care. Fawn over each other as much as you please. As long as you focus on work once you're done.”

I almost doubted my ears.

“Then I'll take you up on that.”

When the prince then tried to drag me off to his private quarters, I panicked and blurted out, “I want to see the opera that’s become the talk of the capital lately.”

I never dreamed he would be able to make arrangements to grant my request the same day. It was a bit strange, however, that he mumbled to himself afterward, “We’d best go before my mother catches on.”

At any rate, I was genuinely happy he’d made such accommodations for me despite the short notice. And so I answered his question honestly. “I wanted to hear Songstress Eugenia sing. She debuted during the Holy Night’s Banquet, so unfortunately I wasn’t able to see her for her first performance.”

The Holy Night’s Banquet was an official event, so the free time I had during it was rather limited. When I heard that she would be debuting then, it vexed me that I wouldn’t be able to attend.

The prince chuckled. “If you truly wanted to support that songstress, you should have sent her flowers under the name of the prince’s fiancée rather than using your initials to hide your identity. Why didn’t you do that, Eli?”

“Uh...” I panicked, wondering how he could have known that I secretly sent her a bouquet. A cold sweat beaded on my forehead.

True, it was common for the royal family and nobility to show support for artists publicly. But I feared doing that with the songstress would stir rumors as to how the two of us became acquainted to begin with. That would be a bit...no, *quite* inconvenient.

Frankly, it was the prince whom I didn’t want to discover my secret. I knew if I made my support official, he would hear word immediately and ask me about it. That was what I had wanted to avoid. Everyone had their youthful indiscretions, didn’t they?

Sweat continued to pour down my forehead as I searched for the words to say, feeling a bit defiant in the face of his questioning. But the prince merely flashed the same smile at me that he always wore.

“Elianna, I admit, I’m most curious. Where would a Bibliophile Princess like you discover a songstress before her reputation was prominent enough to warrant a book being written about her?” His smile deepened as his merciless interrogation continued. “We have no secrets between us, right?”

He didn’t bring up the fact that we’d promised to be together during the banquet, but he scarcely had to. The atmosphere was tense enough I knew I couldn’t escape, and as the curtain on the stage rose, my mind flashed back to that summer night three years ago.

“Eli! I knew you would be in the archives.”

It was an early afternoon in the middle of summer.

The archives were located in a block of the Sauslind palace where the sun didn’t reach. It was quite cool in here even on the hottest of days, making it a popular, secret reprieve for many at the palace.

As someone who regularly stayed in the archives, I was helping some of the staff with their work—namely, carefully sorting each book one by one, which was an enjoyable task by my standards.

It was normally quiet in here, so when I heard someone say my name, I peered back in surprise to find one of my cousins who was about the same age as me. She was accompanied by Lord Alexei’s little sister, Lady Therese Strasser, whom I’d grown quite close to immediately after arriving in the capital. As the two of them raced over, I slowly scaled down my stepladder to meet them.

Lady Therese was the first to blurt something out. “Lady Elianna, are you free tonight?”

“Pardon?” I blinked several times, trying to guess what meaning could lie beneath that question.

Her auburn eyes twinkled with amusement. She ignored my confusion and continued, “There’s going to be a really entertaining event going on tonight. I was wondering if you would come with us.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure of how else to respond.

My cousin, Julia, cut in. “Come on, Eli, let’s go.”

Julia was the second daughter of Earl Storrev. She was sandwiched between her two sisters; the older one was the heir to the family, very mature and down-to-earth, and the younger was shrewd and calculating. Julia, however, was more reserved and quiet. Her dark brown eyes always regarded every situation calmly, making her skilled at deescalating conflict. It was hard to believe we were the same age—just fifteen years old.

Like Lady Therese, she was insistent on me going.

“Eli, you always coop yourself up in the archives and never go out. The last time you left this place was a few days ago, wasn’t it? When my mother took you along to the opera. I know they wouldn’t allow you to visit a summer retreat even if you asked, so we can at least enjoy a night together, just us girls.”

She was right; as the prince’s betrothed, I couldn’t leave the palace on a whim. It didn’t matter that I was, in truth, only a fake fiancée.

While I stood there with my brows furrowed, Lady Therese’s eyes sparkled with delight as she explained, “Serge Crowley is the talk of the capital right now, and he’s going to be singing somewhere tonight.”

“So that’s what this is about.” Now I finally understood.

Since the beginning of summer, the young singer Serge Crowley had shot to fame overnight thanks to his performances at the Royal Opera House. He had adorable facial features and the bearings of a nobleman. For as slender as he was, he had a surprisingly powerful voice, belting out songs about heartbreaking love.

I learned about him recently when my aunt and Julia dragged me along to the theater.

“There’s going to be an evening event at the Royal Opera House then?” I asked.

“No.” Julia shook her head. “You know Viscount Gorton, don’t you? He’s made a name for himself recently as a composer. Serge is going to perform at the viscount’s manor.”

“Oh, I see.”

In other words, they were inviting me to an evening party. Serge was a famous young singer, after all. They were likely curious and wanted to hear his voice up close. Knowing I wasn’t very proactive when it came to evening parties and noble events, they had decided to invite me along out of consideration.

I smiled. “Very well, then I’ll ask Alfred to escort me—”

But Lady Therese interrupted me in a loud voice. “Besides, I heard you’ve been interested in Serge ever since you saw him at the opera, Lady Elianna. I understand how you feel. His voice has the power to melt even the toughest of maidens’ hearts.”

Although it was clear she was teasing by her tone, I was left staring blankly. True, I was interested in the man, but in a completely different sense than she was insinuating.

Julia and Lady Therese both giggled mischievously. The latter brought her index finger to her lips and said, “Of course, we won’t tell His Highness. It’s a secret between us three.”

While the two of them continued to indulge themselves in their amusement, they ushered me along. I followed them with a question mark hanging over my head, completely confused as to what was going on.

Unbeknownst to me, there was a boy with honey-colored hair in one of the nearby aisles who also spun around on his heel and left at the exact same time.

Verse 2: Waltz With the Phantom

Everyone has something they're afraid of. The longer you live, the more you discover there are things and people you can't defy. There was only one such person for me, and he'd been an absolute authority since I first met him. Although lately, I was beginning to think there was someone else besides him, as well.

The stairs led down to a floor resplendent with decorations and lively music. Boisterous laughter boomed as nobles, dressed to perfection, engaged in idle banter among one another. It was little different than the capital's usual evening parties, except for one element: everyone had their faces hidden beneath masks. By hiding their true identities, they could indulge themselves in ways they normally couldn't lest they be recognized.

There were those who hid only their eyes and those who hid everything—even the hair on their head. Some girls wore exotic veils acquired from abroad, and some men wore eccentric, animal-like decorations. People's tastes fell over a broad range, but one thing was true for all of them: no one was showing their face. Just for tonight, they were forgetting their social status and basking in the casual atmosphere that the masquerade ball provided.

"Women sure can be bold sometimes," I, Alan Ferrera, whispered to myself beneath my clown mask.

Only youthful indiscretion could lead one to lose themselves in this madness, regardless of the fact that a noble was hosting the party. *But it's not a bad location*, I thought as I surveyed the surrounding area.

Masquerade balls could lead to chaos sometimes, if past experiences in the capital were anything to go by. But as a composer, Viscount Gorton had enough pride in himself to invite only those of respectable character. No such madness would play out here. Besides, most of the people in attendance were nobility. People might recognize one another in spite of the masks, but they would never say as much. That was one of the rules of a masquerade ball.

As I watched the people mingle, pretending not to know each other, I caught sight of something interesting that made my lips peel back. I hummed thoughtfully.

There was a girl with fluffy, platinum-colored hair, clad in a dress of mixed ashen gray and white. Her airy skirt bounced around her as she moved, much like the wings on her back that were decorated with

lace. Her appearance drew the attention of other men in the room. She wore a mask that looked like bird wings to hide her eyes, but it wasn't adequate enough to hide her identity.

For a bit now, she'd been on the receiving end of numerous dance requests and invitations to speak in private. Some men had even tried to push fruit wine onto her. She was a source of fascination.

"This can't be good..."

My master had ordered me to spread a new nickname for her around the capital, and it never suited her better than it did now with her current outfit. She was the Fairy Princess. I had to commend Lady Therese and Lady Julia. They'd deliberately designed the dress to bring out the princess's inner beauty. However...

"He's going to be pissed, and I don't want to be caught in the crossfire."

If my master, the prince, were at this party, it wouldn't be a problem. Unfortunately, Prince Chris had left to perform an inspection in a nearby city and was returning to the capital later than anticipated. I had sent a message along to inform him of what was happening, but I could already picture the demon lord awakening.

I shivered, chills running down my spine.

Unaccustomed to so much attention, the Fairy Princess turned down all of the men's solicitations. Her bashful innocence only served to draw even more of them in, like moths to a flame. Her confusion was palpable; the prince had done an admirable job snuffing out all the flies that would have otherwise flocked to her, which was why she was so inexperienced.

"There had to be a better way to go about this," I mumbled to myself, smiling bitterly as I watched the lady's friends chase off her more persistent suitors.

The two girls were close with the Fairy Princess, and they had grown frustrated this past year at the complete lack of development between said princess and the prince. That was probably why they had resorted to such a primitive method as this. Although, it would be poor manners to call their thinking shallow. Going to all this trouble was proof of how much they cared.

Well, either way, I was trying to fight back a laugh.

"Lady Therese is finding the whole thing amusing, I see."

She was much more pleasant than her older brother—the ice demon.

All right, so how should I handle this?

It was my duty to keep an eye on the Fairy Princess, but I'd also heard some intriguing rumors about this manor. I wanted to look into them. However, Scarecrow didn't seem likely to help me out.

As I contemplated what to do, I also inwardly tipped my hat to the

fearless girls who had started all of this. I certainly didn't have the guts to summon the demon lord as they had.

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Why was this happening?

We went to Lady Therese's house to dress ourselves, and then before I knew it, we were in a carriage and arriving at the event venue.

When she noticed me feeling hesitant to attend the evening party without an escort, Lady Therese said, "It's a casual gathering where you can just let loose, Lady Elianna." She merrily fastened her mask onto her face, and the three of us (my cousin Julia included) headed inside.

And that brings us to the present...

"You're an adorable fairy, my lady. Please, allow me to see for myself how light those wings are. Won't you dance with—"

"No, a fairy belongs in nature. Why don't the two of us venture out into the garden for a little stroll?"

"No. A fairy would be more inclined to drink fruit wine, no? Please, have a taste of—"

My head was spinning from the incessant invites that came flying at me one after the other. I knew of masquerade balls as a concept, but of course, I had never participated in one before. The change in atmosphere left my mouth hanging in awe. Who could have ever imagined that by merely putting a mask over my face, I would transform from the Library Ghost into a fairy?

While I reaffirmed to myself what a curious event this was, Julia and Lady Therese were on either side of me dealing with a number of suitors themselves. Lady Therese was especially popular, more so than at normal evening parties. A mask could scarcely hide her elegant beauty, and the way she conducted herself was just graceful enough without seeming haughty. Nevertheless, she skillfully brushed the men's solicitations aside.

As I was captivated, wishing I could learn from her example, one man suddenly grabbed me by the arm. "Excuse me," he said.

"Huh...?"

"Ah, you look pale. You must not be used to this kind of place, my fairy. Come along, let's rest over there together."

Right as this stranger was about to steal me away, Lady Therese smacked her folding fan against her palm and interrupted. Julia had an unusually hostile expression on her face as well.

Then, abruptly...

"Pardon me."

With just two words, the atmosphere in the room changed. It was

almost as if the ruler of the night had descended. For as opulent as the room was with its fancy chandeliers and guests adorned in jewels, it still paled in comparison to this man. People's gazes were drawn to him—a man in all black with a matching black mask.

Even the yellow light of the candles took a knee in front of his dazzling golden hair. He was obviously handsome despite the mask obscuring his face. His physique still resembled a growing youth, but he had a commanding, impenetrable presence about him. What most stood out to me, though, was how intimidating he was, as if he could pressure even full grown men to bend to his will.

"I'm afraid the Fairy Princess is already engaged. Could you stand aside?" His restrained voice echoed. The words he'd used were polite, but there was an unspoken threat that made the air heavy with tension.

The man who'd grabbed me by the arm gulped and took a step back. All of the other men around him did the same. The moment this phantom in black appeared, everyone receded like the ocean tide, overwhelmed by his presence. Only I was left in their wake.

Quietly, the phantom stepped closer to me. He wore the same overcoat you might see a male opera singer in, except the collar was colored a fiery red. That wasn't the only thing that stood out in the swathes of darkness that rippled around him, though.

His lips curled into a smile as he took my hand. "My Fairy Princess, allow me to be your partner for this dance." The way he spoke implied he wouldn't take no for an answer.

As if captivated by this phantom's invisible spell, I reached forward and took his hand. He pulled me with him, and the two of us swayed to the melody of a waltz. There was a darkness deep within the eye holes of his mask that seemed to swallow me. My feet moved naturally, with no regard for those watching, as we circled around the room. Everything about this felt just right, and my body melted into the music.

It's so easy to dance with him, I realized after a while. Normally, I tensed up when dancing with a stranger, focusing so hard on reciting the dance steps in my head that my limbs moved like stiff boards. There were very few people I felt this comfortable with. There was my family, of course—Alfred and my father—and Jean, who was often my practice partner, but other than them...

The phantom chuckled, lifting his chin proudly as he said, "The way your wings sway is adorable. It gives me the impression that if I don't trap you while I can, you may flutter away from me."

I swallowed hard. Other people had told me similar things before, but for some reason, when he said it, I got the feeling he really meant it.

“I don’t...actually have wings, though.”

I was sure it was merely an expression of flattery at evening parties, but the way he spoke made it sound as if I really did possess invisible wings.

His eyes flickered with amusement. “I see. Well, I suppose it would be hard to see anything on one’s back—be it wings or one’s own charm. But you really do flutter off to different worlds all the time.”

“Eh?” I blinked back at him.

He smiled and pressed his hand firmly against my waist. In an instant, he pulled me so close his body heat was spilling over my skin.

“And that’s exactly why I want to capture you,” he whispered. “But flapping those wings constantly must tire you out. I’m sure you must need a break.”

Apparently that was his way of signaling our dance had come to an end. He pulled me along, the two of us gliding off the dance floor and through the doors to the outside garden.



Verse 3: The Garden's Overture

It was so chilly that the summer heat earlier that afternoon almost seemed to be a lie.

Stars streaked the night's sky as music trickled out from the main hall. My eyes were glued to the man pulling me by the hand as we strolled along. Occasionally, he would glance back at me with a smile. I got the giggling feeling that I knew this man.

Surely...it can't be him. My heart ached at the thought. *But why...?*

I tilted my head, confused as to why I would feel so forlorn over the thought that this man couldn't be the prince. I tried to search my brain for answers, but before I could, the man in front of me slowed to a stop. The night's air caressed his hair, blowing through his golden locks.

He breathed a small sigh. "Fairy Princess, may I ask you why you decided to partake in this masquerade ball tonight?"

"Huh?"

The smile was still on his lips as he glanced back at me, but his voice was pained. "Your innocence and vulnerability are what make you so charming, but at times...you make me want to lock you away so you won't fly off to be with another man. If I could do that, then..." He lifted my hand, pressing his lips to my fingers. His warm, moist breath rolled across my skin. "These fingers, this warmth—every breath you take, your very heartbeat...would be all mine alone."

In my head, I understood they were lines from the opera and not his own words, but the way he moved was so bewitching I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

His eyes were glued to me as well, watching me from behind the mask. Right as I thought he was going to kiss my fingers again, he abruptly flipped my hand over and planted his lips against my palm.

"Ah," I gasped. My heart leaped into my throat.

This is dangerous, something in my head told me.

Before I could rip my hand away and flee, he threw his overcoat wide open and scooped me up. With me cradled in his arms, the phantom then ducked into the shadows of some nearby trees.

I tried to raise my voice in protest, but he hushed me. At the same time, voices and footsteps came echoing closer.

"Please wait, Viscount Gorton!"

I trembled in surprise at how rough the man's tone was. As if to

comfort me, the phantom stroked my head.

Shoes slapped violently against the stone path, the man's cries echoing as he chased after another man. The latter stopped and turned around, standing not far from where we were hidden.

"I already know you weren't the one who composed that song, Viscount Gorton!" said the man giving chase.

"I have no idea what you are on about, Serge Crowley."

I flinched upon hearing that name, and the phantom tightened his arms around me. The two of us were pressed so close I could almost hear his heartbeat. My breath caught in my throat.

Nearby, the elderly Viscount Gorton and the young Serge Crowley continued their tense conversation. The former's voice was low and gravelly while the latter's was rich and pleasant.

"The song and the opera you claim you wrote based on the Lady of the Lagoon are almost identical to what my former mentor, Cyrus Wharton, wrote. Even if other people don't recognize it, I do. I was the man's apprentice. I implore you, Viscount, stop dishonoring a dead man's name like this. Where have you hidden the original *Lady of the Lagoon* my teacher wrote?!"

I stiffened, shocked by these allegations.

"You," a low voice growled. "Do you even know who you're aiming these accusations at? I am a noble. You may have a little bit of popularity to your name, boy, but you're still just a low-born singer. Do you want to be punished for defamation?" The viscount snorted with derision. "Besides, who do you think the world is going to believe? A nobleman like me or some no-name composer? You have no proof. And if you keep lodging these false charges against me, I will find a way to deal with you, Serge Crowley."

Serge swallowed a breath when he realized the viscount was threatening him.

Viscount Gorton continued, "You're only enjoying that popularity because you performed a song in the opera I created. As easily as I can snap these two fingers together, I could have you replaced with someone else."

The message, albeit unspoken, was clear: "Learn your place."

Footsteps receded as Viscount Gorton took his leave.

I breathed a sigh and mumbled, "As I suspected." A suspicion had weighed on me ever since I saw the opera myself, and now I knew why.

The singer must have heard my voice—unsurprising, given how keen his ears had to be due to his trade. "Who's there?!" he demanded as he pushed his way through the thicket that had kept us concealed until now. "Nobles?" His voice strained with disappointment. After a short, lamentful sigh, he apologized. "Pardon me for intruding on

your...little tryst.”

“Excuse me?” I gasped.

The phantom cradling me in his arms scoffed. “You should be sorry. That crude spectacle soured the moment for us. You’ve frightened my fairy princess.”

“Yes, my deepest apologies.” Serge promptly spun on his heel to leave.

“However,” the phantom continued, releasing me from his hold, “my princess seems intent on solving the opera’s mystery. Let us hear the details of your story, Serge Crowley.”

Surprised, he turned back, lifting his face. Our eyes met, and I gave him an encouraging nod.

“Ever since I heard your song, it’s been weighing on me,” I said. “The man you spoke of—Cyrus Wharton—is a playwright from the town of Berik, yes?”

He held his breath, eyes wide with surprise. “That’s right. Berik had only a tiny theater, but Cyrus was a talented man who composed music and wrote operas. But...how would you know that?”

His confusion was only natural; as Viscount Gorton had said, Cyrus Wharton was largely unknown. Pleased to have caught him off guard with my knowledge, I took a few steps closer.

“Author Dan Edold wrote about it in one of his old travel journals. He said there was a man whose talent rivaled any playwright or composer at the Royal Opera House. Unfortunately, this man had already passed away by the time I learned about him, so I sent for copies of a few of the scripts he left behind and read them. His version featured a female protagonist. That song you performed a few days ago—it was originally meant for a woman, wasn’t it?”

His jaw dropped. A split second later, he snatched my hands up in his and, expression pleading, said, “Please! Help me rescue the *Lady of the Lagoon*... That is, help me rescue the songstress Master Wharton left behind.”

Pardon?

The faint hum of music from the party venue filled the air around us. I also heard what sounded like someone clicking their tongue from behind me.

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According to Serge, Viscount Gorton was holding Cyrus Wharton’s daughter in his custody. The now-deceased playwright had passed knowledge of his unpublished work onto her, which was why the viscount was keeping her locked up—in hopes of taking it all for himself. Serge realized this when Viscount Gorton announced his latest composition, and he had been waiting for an opportunity to

rescue her since. Unfortunately, he lost his patience after being unable to search the manor for her, which resulted in their quarrel moments ago.

The phantom listened to the story from the beginning, but once it was over, he voiced his skepticism. "I understand how you reached the conclusion that the viscount was keeping the girl based on the characteristics of the song he publicized, but are you really certain she's being held here?"

"Well, I..."

"Excuse me!" A cheerful voice cut in as a young boy intruded on our conversation. He wore a whimsical clown mask on his face.

Goodness, I thought, taken aback.

The boy bowed toward the phantom, and the latter nodded. Apparently this boy was the phantom's servant because his gaze never left the phantom as he proceeded with his explanation. "There's no mistake; she's definitely here. There are rumors about a songstress's ghost appearing on the grounds recently. No one has ever seen her, but people talk about hearing her beautiful voice, night after night."

"Eugenia..." Serge curled his fists in frustration, his voice straining with grief as he relayed what happened when the two of them last parted. He told us how he was blessed with an opportunity to study opera in the capital, so he decided to leave Berik. He didn't learn about Wharton's passing until much later, and by that time, Eugenia had already disappeared. He'd been unable to locate her since.

"My plan was to become famous here in the capital, so I could return home and bring attention to our theater there. That place—with Master Wharton and the little Eugenia—was my home. Please, I implore you. Lend me your aid and help me save her!" Serge bowed his head low.

My chest tightened. If what he claimed was true, then Viscount Gorton had committed some ghastly crimes. Not only had he plagiarized another playwright, but he had also held the man's daughter captive. Anger boiled in the pit of my stomach. This man had abused his power as a noble in the most heinous of ways. He had some nerve, taking credit for something another had painstakingly written, parading it about as if it was a product of his talent.

I stepped forward and opened my mouth to volunteer my assistance, but a new voice interrupted me before I could.

"Ah, there you are. Miss, come on, it's 'bout time we go home." My manservant appeared, oblivious to the atmosphere as he urged me to hurry along. "'Sides, if we don't get outta here soon, we're gonna be in for it. The whole party is in an uproar, saying someone of high rank has appeared."

"Oh no..." I panicked, too. We had sneaked off to this evening

party in secret, careful to make sure His Highness didn't find out. Lady Therese had said it herself—this was supposed to be our little secret. I had no idea who this high-ranking person could be, but it would reflect shamefully on the prince if my real identity were to be revealed here.

What should I do?

I hesitated between wanting to help Serge and needing to uphold my reputation.

Someone nearby sighed. "Go on home for tonight, Fairy Princess."

When I glanced back, the phantom was smiling reluctantly at me. "You have people who will worry if you don't return, yes? I am sure your companions must be concerned as well. Return home for the evening."

"But..." My voice trailed off as I glanced hesitantly back at Serge, who had pleaded for our aid.

Again, the phantom sighed. "Don't worry, I will take care of the matter regarding the songstress. Return home before you get wrapped up in all the fuss here."

I stared at the youth in the mask. Tonight was our first meeting. Would it really be all right to leave something like this to a stranger? At the same time, I wouldn't be of much help here without giving away my identity.

"Can I really entrust this to you?" I asked, swallowing hard.

"Heh." His lips cracked into a smile. He reached forward, fingers brushing over my hair. My eyes were glued to him as he leaned in, whispering sweetly in my ear. "My Fairy Princess, I will grant your wish by any means necessary."

Flustered, I froze up, heart drumming in my chest.

"Sounds like he means it," Jean said, ushering me along.

I gave a curtsy before hurrying off. I reunited with Julia and Lady Therese, and the three of us left the viscount's manor.

Asking for a person's name at a masquerade ball was against the rules. I knew that, but I still desperately wanted to ask that masked phantom for his. I had to bury that desire in the back of my heart.

Finale: The Phantom's Endless Love

Cold beads of sweat streamed down my forehead as I recalled that summer night three years ago. After that, the authorities launched an official investigation on Viscount Gorton's manor. They rescued the captured songstress, who then testified that Viscount Gorton had plagiarized Cyrus Wharton's opera and songs. Eugenia reclaimed the rights to the *Lady of the Lagoon*, and she began learning opera anew.

Three years later—that is, this year—her long-awaited debut arrived. And of course, her love interest was played by none other than the popular Serge Crowley. The opera they were performing was Cyrus Wharton's posthumous work, *Lady of the Lagoon*, which he had written for his daughter.

It was based on the Hero King, King Karl, and Princess Ceysheila, the Lady of the Lagoon. The two were popular historical figures used frequently in various works of fiction. I had seen numerous performances based on them, but this opera in particular felt special. The reason for that had everything to do with that masquerade ball three years ago. And as for why I didn't feel like I could bring it up with His Highness, well...

The prince gave a small, bitter chuckle. "Eli..." His voice was calm, as if trying to soothe me. He reached over, grasping the hand that had been resting in my lap. Even through the darkness, I could see the mischievous smile on his face and the sweet glimmer in those blue eyes.

He lifted my hand to his lips. "My Fairy Princess, you really do flutter off to different worlds all the time. And that's exactly why I want to capture you." The prince planted a kiss on my palm.

My eyes flew open and my jaw dropped in surprise. *It can't be*, I thought, although the answer was quite clear. The prince possessed the same blue eyes, blond hair, and commanding aura.

"So it was you," I murmured, completely at a loss.

The prince chuckled, smirking. "Elianna, my Fairy Princess, you mustn't sneak off and go to masquerade balls like that anymore. It's much too dangerous."

A number of different emotions came flooding up from my chest, manifesting as tears in the corners of my eyes. I was the one who had gone there in secret, so I had no right to complain that he'd kept the truth from me. In fact, I berated myself for being so dense and not

realizing who it was sooner. But more than anything, I felt relief—and that was what produced the tears.

“I understand.” I looked up at the prince and nodded. “I was so worried that I might have fallen for someone else, however short lived it was. It’s such a relief to hear you were the same person this entire time.” My lips pulled into a smile.

He stared back at me, wide-eyed. Then the prince sucked in a breath and glanced at the ceiling. After a few moments, he pressed my hand to his forehead and slumped forward.

Bewildered, I blinked at him several times, unsure as to why he was fidgeting around so much. “Your Highness?”

He expelled the loudest sigh I had ever heard from him, as if all the air in his body was spilling out. “I surrender. An unconditional surrender, honestly, I swear. I’m no match for you. I never could be.” He paused, grumbling, “Of course, I knew that already, though.”

Finally, he took a deep exhale once more. When he lifted his head next, his expression was a mix of defeat and determination.

The prince planted another kiss on my palm, and then he glanced up at me with those sweet, gentle blue eyes. “I surrender to you, my Fairy Princess.” His words were so soft and melodic, I gave him a bashful smile.

Unlike in our usual exchanges, he kept his gaze locked on me as he pressed his lips close to my palm and mumbled, “Yes, I really do surrender. Every second of every day, I fall for you more and more.”



Afterword

It's been a while everyone—a whole year, actually, since volume 3 was published in Japan. Such a long time that I think you all may have even forgotten who I am, so I would like to start by introducing myself once again.

First, I should warn you that I'm eternally afflicted by two illnesses: the "I-can't-write-anything" illness and the "Allow-me-to-pull-out-my-endless-list-of-excuses" illness. These are also comorbid with my "That's-it-my-life-is-over" illness. After kindly diagnosing me, my friend decided to give me treatment in the form of tough love, saying, "Get over it already!"

Yes, you guessed it. I'm not ill at all, just a spoiled baby. I truly am sorry.

Despite receiving news that the publication would continue after the third volume, I struggled to come up with anything concrete. I spent most of my time staring down a white computer screen and idling away. Finally, I resolved to step away from writing for a while. And you know what happened? Curiously, I...wound up not being able to write a darned thing!

I'm sure you're probably thinking, "What the heck?!" much like my friend was, and you probably want to throw things at me now. I'm sorry.

Ahem, well, I hope you were able to get a laugh out of that, but honestly, not being able to write all that time was draining for me as well. I wanted to write, but I couldn't do it. I could almost sympathize with a certain character in this volume. It was like having my favorite food in front of me but I couldn't eat it—that was how awful it was. Yes, I can understand our dear Scarecrow's feelings to a painful degree.

To tell the truth, I still haven't escaped my slump. (I know, I'm not nearly skilled enough to claim to be in a slump.) Nonetheless, thanks to my own persistent drive to write as well as readers and my friends promising to wait for the next volume, plus my editor who continually encouraged me, I managed to force myself back into the world of *Bibliophile Princess*.

Thank you all for waiting for me without giving up on me. I truly, truly appreciate it.

That pretty much sums up my (pathetic) situation this past year.

Although, if I told you I hadn't done a single thing since the middle of winter, I'm sure it would only encourage you to scold me some more, so we'll leave it at that for now. I've already received enough criticism from the self-professed leader of the "I appreciate Eli for her airheadedness" club in the form of, "What in the everloving hell are these new developments you're giving us?!" (My liberal interpretation of what they said.) So I would appreciate it if you would take it easy on me! Lol

Actually, these developments are something I had in mind since I revised the script for the second volume. While I was trying to think of what tribulations to give our inexperienced hero, Chris, I also started thinking about what our protagonist lacked. After combining that with what I wanted to write, it wound up like this.

Since the story ended on a cliffhanger and our hero (and heroine) have yet to overcome the hurdles I have presented to them, I can't really talk in specifics about what was going on in the background in relation to this story. So I will keep it vague.

First, I'd like to talk about the obstacle I gave Elianna. She has been at the prince's side in the palace up until now, always presenting her ideas from a place of safety and security. I wouldn't quite say she's in enemy territory right now, but she's among people who oppose her. Will she still be able to speak her mind as she did before? That's one of the issues she has to face.

The story is suspended in the air right at the peak of excitement, I realize, but I hope you readers will look on fondly as our pair navigates this mess.

Next, I would like to talk about the short story we added for this volume. Honestly, I once again really, *really* couldn't bring myself to write anything and caused no end of grief to my editor. My sentences kept going off in odd directions, and my editor had to keep pulling my trajectory back on track. Now that I actually read back over it, I have to shake my head at myself. Like, the story turned out this simple, what were you struggling so much with?

(Completely unrelated, but when I play RPGs, I often get lost in the middle of cities and dungeons. My siblings are always making fun of me, saying it's my special talent. I never dreamed this would happen to me in books as well...)

Ahem, anyway... The second arc, "The Phantom's Serenade", is obviously a concept I came up with based on the famous musical. But even I found myself skeptical that Eli wouldn't recognize Chris simply because he had a mask on his face. When I brought it up with my editor, she came up with a brilliant example to reassure me.

"Remember that famous male anime/manga character in a tuxedo

suit who appears all the time, throwing a red rose at the floor? No one recognized him in a mask, so you'll be just fine!"

Amazing. Just what you would expect from an editor working on shoujo works. Kudos to her. Lol

Anyway, the story in this volume was so serious throughout that I felt it lacked my usual playfulness. Thus, I added this sweet extra story to help raise everyone's blood sugar. And who's to say, knowing me, maybe things will get even more cavity-inducing in the future!

That's enough about the contents of volume 4. There is something else I would like to announce to everyone. I am sure there are those of you who are already aware, but recently, a manga adaptation for *Bibliophile Princess* was approved. I had to ask my editor numerous times whether I was dreaming or not. After pinching myself all over and banging my little toe into the corner of some furniture, I confirmed it was very much reality.

The artist in charge will be Yui Kikuta-sensei (who has her hands in a bunch of different works). Odd how even our names are the same! Lol

I can only express my stories through words, so I have a lot of respect for people who can express them through drawings. Seeing Yui Kikuta-sensei breathe new life into my series and characters has been very moving. I hope you will all get a taste of how breathtaking it is as well!

Really, it's just very entertaining seeing all the characters moving and making so many different expressions. To be completely honest, I didn't even realize it was the story I'd written at first! Lol

I hope you will be sure to read the manga version of *Bibliophile Princess* as well!

And now for my usual confessions.

To everyone who is involved with *Bibliophile Princess*, from the illustrator Sheena-sensei, to the editors, head proofreader, and everyone else: I bow my head down past the floor, all the way to the earth's crust! I'm so sorry for all of the trouble I caused you. Thank you so very, very much for not turning your backs on me.

Sheena-sensei, I am so sorry for making an absolute mess out of your schedule numerous times. (sobs) My apologies for all the elderly men who appeared in this volume, but thanks to her illustrations, they were all still very spellbindingly handsome. As always, I received immense motivation from seeing her drawings.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to my friends, family, and others who had to put up with my constant crying.

Lastly, a thank you to all you loyal readers who waited for me all

this time. Words can't even begin to express how much I appreciate you. Knowing you were waiting for me was what drove me to keep doing my best. Thank you so much.

I hope you'll read the next book as well when it comes out.

-Yui



Bonus Short Stories

The Fool's Faux Pas

Once we were in our carriage and a safe distance from the masquerade ball, Lady Therese and Julia slipped off their masks. They peered into my face, their grins stretching wider by the second.

"So how was it, Lady Elianna? Did you enjoy your first masquerade ball?"

After untying my mask as well, I stared at them for a moment and sighed. "I feel a bit...exhausted."

"Oh dear." Lady Therese and Julia exchanged glances.

Julia smiled over at me. "Eli, you disappeared off to the garden with that dashing fellow. We thought it would be rude to interrupt you two, so we didn't butt in, but..."

"Honestly, I was waiting with bated breath wondering if he'd make it in time. That man has a habit of swooping in at the most opportune moment and stealing the show," Lady Therese grumbled, cutting my cousin off.

"Well, it's not like we did anything too spectacular aside from setting the stage," said Julia.

Lady Therese giggled at that, but I was completely confused as to what they were referring to and could only tilt my head.

I smiled carefully, trying to keep my feelings suppressed. "I'm only filled with remorse that I caused that stranger so much trouble."

The two of them stared at me, dumbfounded. "Huh?"

"Eli," my cousin said, "surely you must have realized that phantom was actually—no, this is you we're talking about. Um... Didn't you ask his name?"

"It was a masquerade ball. I thought you weren't allowed to ask people's names?"

"Well, yes, that's true," she mumbled, frowning for some reason as she glanced over at Lady Therese.

The latter expelled a sigh as she spread her folding fan open. Behind it, she mumbled to herself, "That fool..."

I cocked my head at her, but she only smiled back at me.

"It's fine, Lady Elianna. It's a gentleman's duty to clean up after a lady with a smile on his face. And if it erases the involvement of the Fairy Princess in this matter, I am sure he will be all too eager to see it through." A wicked grin spread across Lady Therese's lips. "Besides,

this is what he gets for not stating his name. And this is our little secret, after all. His Highness knows nothing about it, so he has no right to scold anyone.”

“I suppose so...?” I nodded, though I still wasn’t sure what she was going on about.

Beside me, Jean was pale as a sheet as he mumbled, “You girls sure are carefree in the face of the demon lord. I’d be shakin’ in my boots if I were you.”

Of course, none of us had any way of knowing that another man had shared those same sentiments earlier that night.

The Demon in the Stars

“The stars have an intimate connection to farming—people even have names for them like ‘The Wheat Planting Star’ and ‘The Wheat Cutting Star.’ Observing the heavens is also imperative in the creation of the calendar. In fact, some think the movement of the heavens is intricately linked to events in our past as well.”

A glimmering sky full of stars stretched out overhead.

There were an unusual number of couples this summer attending Orphen’s astronomical observation soiree. This was partly due to a certain girl sharing a story she’d read in some foreign literature with her maid. Word of it spread from there, enveloping the entirety of the palace.

The girl in question was standing a short distance in front of me, listening to the old man’s lecture with vested interest.

“You’re referring to Nostra Oak’s *Prophecy from the Stars*,” she said. “Entertaining, assuming you read it as a fictional tale, but—”

“No, Lady Elianna. That book prophesied the fall of the Kai Arg Empire, the outbreak of the plague, and our war with Maldura. Every time any major event has happened in history, there has been a disturbance in the stars. That we can say for certain!”

In other words, any time meteor showers, eerily crimson red stars, or enormous comets were spotted, some monumental change followed. All of these were recorded in *Prophecy from the Stars*, ergo people worshiped Nostra as a prophet. At least, that was the questionable line of thinking this official was imparting, and the girl listened to everything he said without even batting an eyelash.

Oh boy...

I, Alan Ferrera, couldn’t help chuckling in frustration.

The girl in question was, as I am sure you all must have guessed, my master’s betrothed. If her demonstration at the masquerade ball a few days ago was any indication, she was far too gullible and trusting. Well, part of that was my master’s fault for being so overprotective

and coddling her.

I spotted Scarecrow standing at the edge of the gathering and made my way over to him. “Why is Lady Elianna here at the palace so late?” If he didn’t inform me of such anomalies promptly, I had no way of dealing with them. The only reason I showed up to this little party was because I was hunting down rumors. Imagine my surprise at seeing my master’s betrothed here.

Scarecrow, who likely knew what this entire party was about before coming here, shrugged as if he couldn’t care less. “The marquess and Alfred were swamped with work. The miss brought ’em some stuff to eat, then that old owl got his claws on her.”

“Aha.” Now I understood how things wound up like this, but we were in no less of a dangerous situation now than we had been a few days prior at the masquerade ball. This was an observation party in name only—it’s true purpose lay elsewhere.

Scarecrow must have understood what I was about to say because he blurted, “Well, don’t worry. We’ll head back soon.”

Unfortunately, right as he finished those words...

“Elianna!”

Word of her being here tonight shouldn’t have even reached the prince yet, but His Highness appeared nonetheless. He sure had a keen intuition and a sharp sense of smell when it came to Lady Elianna.

The couples who’d been whispering sweet nothings to each other under the cover of darkness moments ago now erupted in new whispers. Despite the lack of illumination, our kingdom’s heir to the throne had hair such a brilliant, shining gold color that not even the shadows could not conceal it completely.

“Your Highness...” Lady Elianna shared everyone else’s surprise, spinning around to face him.

The prince hurried over to her, exuding a threatening aura which drove off the man who’d been standing close to the lady. “Is something wrong? It’s so late. If you wanted to partake in this party, you should have asked me to come with you.”

“That’s not necessary,” she said, sounding as monotone and oblivious as she always did.

Prince Chris wasn’t to be deterred, too excited by the delightful surprise of being able to meet with her even at this late hour. “Apparently the foreign love story you shared has started a new tradition among couples of late night dates beneath the stars. I would love to hear what this love story is all about. Won’t you share the tale with me?”

His smile spread, pearly whites sparkling through the darkness as Lady Elianna tilted her head in confusion. “I merely shared a folktale about love from the far east. If you want to know it in detail, the book

it came from is in the archives currently. Shall I borrow it for you?"

"No, I would prefer to hear it straight from your lips." He was being unusually persistent today. Perhaps he was feeling the effects of their evening at the masquerade ball. The thought tickled me with delight.

Sadly for him, the worst pest imaginable chose that most inopportune moment to appear.

"Eli!" called the cheerful voice of Prince Chris's archnemesis—Marquess Bernstein.

"Father!"

"After eating the food you brought, I sped through the rest of my work. Come now, it's late. We should be getting home."

"Of course." She nodded before turning to pay her respects to the prince.

The latter's smile was pulled taut, lips twitching with irritation.

Uh oh...

I was on the verge of bursting out into laughter.

The love story that had been making the rounds at the palace was basically about a princess who'd fallen in love, only for her father to intervene between her and her lover. Thus, the two were only able to meet in secret one night each year during the summer. A similar scene was playing out right in front of me, but sadly for Prince Chris, he wasn't even getting the opportunity for a secret rendezvous with his beloved.

I bit back my laughter. Both Scarecrow and I hurried away from the scene, though not before we could listen in on Prince Chris's archnemesis delivering the killing blow.

"By the way, Prince Christopher, I've sent along some documents requiring your stamp of approval. We'll need them first thing tomorrow morning for our meeting. I do hope you'll have them done in time."

We didn't even need to look back to know the demon lord had descended.

The official that babbled all that nonsense did have one thing right: when stars streak across the sky, they foretell the descent of the fearsome demon lord.



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Bibliophile Princess: Volume 4
by Yui

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